MENG XI SHI
Thousand Autumns
QIAN QIU
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Foreword

If you were to write a story, where would you set it?

In a splendid fantasy like *The Lord of the Rings*? Or against the essence of human nature like *House of Cards*, where it's concealed beneath skyscrapers and high-rises?

Would you give it the qualities of all that is wonderful in the world, or fill it with candid selfishness, cruel and brutal both?

I believe that within every person's heart lies their own answer. Even if we live plain and simple lives, we can depict beautiful scenes far grander than any landscape that can be found in the world.

Thousand Autumns is the unfolding of one such story. The two leads have extreme personalities that are diametric opposites: one finds joy in helping people, while the other resolutely believes that human nature is evil. But because both are them are incredibly strong, they cannot convince each other. And so when they meet, they're destined to clash in a blaze of intense sparks.

To my dear readers, I'm grateful that we had the chance to meet. I'm grateful that you flipped open this story to enter the jianghu of ancient China, to witness the chivalry and bloodshed within, as well as the story of a man who fell from the summit down to the lowest point of his life. Who climbed out of that chasm, step by step, through his own efforts, back to the pinnacle of the world as a martial grandmaster of incredible strength.

I hope that this story will open the great gates of imagination for you, adding a splendid and passionate note of music to your lives.

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Chapter 1:
After the Duel

BANBU PEAK—Half-Step Peak. As the name implied, the summit boasted only a few square inches on which to stand: a half step forward led to a majestic cliff, thousands of meters tall. Above, jagged stones jutted skywards and bowed trees crept forth; below, great swathes of mist swirled and haunting wails echoed throughout. It was a treacherous, craggy place where heaven and earth did not meet.

Facing this cliff loomed another mountain summit, called Yinghui Peak. It was no less high nor steep than Banbu—its walls also soared for thousands of meters, sheer as if pared by a knife. There seemed no likely foothold, and even its scant greenery was ungrounded in soil, its roots twining about the rocks. The sight was enough to make anyone shudder and regret their attempts to scale that peak. And so, the name Yinghui Peak was born—Certain-Regret Peak.

Between these two peaks yawned a natural chasm. Seen from above, a sea of clouds drifted lazily, concealing the fathoms of its depths, and one could faintly hear the vicious roar of unceasing rapids. The common woodcutters and hunters dared not climb there; even Xiantian experts[1] who stood there would find that a sigh stirred within their hearts, lamenting the insignificance of humans before nature.

However, below the mist at the foot of the cliff, between the river waters and mountain walls, wound a stone path paved with uneven rubble. It was long, narrow, and rugged, yet at this moment two men walked upon it, one in front and the other behind.

As the river raged and galloped, waves churned up from time to time and broke against the wet, slippery rocks. If one lacked just a little prudence while walking, they'd be soaked through by the spray even without falling into the waters. But if they tried to lean away instead, they'd meet that sheer rock face and its sharp, jutting stones. In short, the path was a dilemma liable to leave anyone in a woeful state, and yet these two men seemed to

stroll leisurely along as though through a courtyard, their movements confident and graceful.

"I heard that twenty years ago, Xuandu Mountain's Perfected Master Qi defeated the Göktürks' number one martial artist Hulugu, right here on Banbu Peak. And then he forced him to swear an oath to stay out of the Central Plains for the next twenty years. A pity this disciple was still too young to watch that duel. The battle must have been incomparably splendid."

The young man who spoke walked behind the other. Their pace was neither slow nor quick, yet he always kept three steps behind.

The man in front sauntered in small steps, his demeanor as languid as if he truly trod on level ground. The steps of the young man behind him stretched a little longer. Taken alone, the young man in back also bore an immortal's weightless grace, but seen together it was easy to find the subtle differences between the two.

Yan Wushi gave a derisive laugh. "Qi Fengge was indeed worthy of being called number one in all the world. Hulugu was a foreign barbarian—he overestimated himself and invited humiliation because of it. He only had himself to blame. Yet, for the sake of upholding a Daoist sect's pure and lofty image, Qi Fengge refused to kill him and chose instead to establish a twenty-year covenant. Apart from sowing the seeds of trouble for Xuandu Mountain's future, what benefits did he receive?"

Yu Shengyan was curious. "Shizun, was Hulugu truly that great of a martial artist?"

"If I were to fight him now, I would have no guarantee of victory."

"He's really that strong?" Yu Shengyan was aghast. Of course, he understood just how profound his own master's martial arts were. Hulugu's abilities must be just as terrifying if Yan Wushi gave him such an appraisal. Perhaps he'd even rank among the top three in the world.

Yan Wushi's tone was indifferent. "Why else would I say that Qi Fengge left endless troubles for his own disciples and future generations? Twenty years ago, Hulugu might have been slightly inferior to Qi Fengge, but in twenty years, such a gap can be closed. And now, Qi Fengge is dead. Xuandu Mountain will never find a second Qi Fengge."

Yu Shengyan released a soft breath. “Yes, Perfected Master Qi passed away five years ago.”

“Who is the current sect leader of Xuandu Mountain?”

“A disciple of Qi Fengge’s, named Shen Qiao.”

Yan Wushi had little reaction to the name. He’d met Qi Fengge only once, and that was twenty-five years ago. Back then, Shen Qiao had only just been accepted as one of Qi Fengge’s personal disciples.

There was no doubt that Xuandu Mountain was called “The World’s Number One Daoist Sect,” but in the opinion of Yan Wushi, who had just emerged from ten years of seclusion,[2] no one on Xuandu Mountain was worthy of standing as his opponent, other than Qi Fengge.

Unfortunately, Qi Fengge was dead.

Yu Shengyan saw his master’s lack of interest and added, “I heard that Hulugu’s disciple Kunye, the current number one martial artist of the Göktürks and Wise King of the Left, is here today at the summit of Banbu Peak to challenge Shen Qiao. He says that he wants to clear the shame from Hulugu’s loss. Does Shizun wish to go and watch?”

Yan Wushi answered neither yes nor no. “In the ten or so years I spent in seclusion, what other major events occurred, apart from Qi Fengge’s death?” He asked instead.

Yu Shengyan thought for a moment. “Shortly after you entered seclusion, the new emperor of Qi, Gao Wei, ascended to the throne. But he is a man of lustful indulgence and boundless extravagance, so Qi’s strength has plummeted since then. There are rumors that Yuwen Yong, the emperor of Zhou, is plotting to attack Qi—Zhou will probably annex the north soon.

“Over these last ten years, because of Qi Fengge’s death, the ranking of the world’s top ten martial artists has also changed. Yi Pichen of Chunyang Monastery on Qingcheng Mountain, Buddhist Master Xueting of Zhou, and Ruyan Kehui of Linchuan Academy are recognized as the top three in the world, and they represent exactly the three schools of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

“But some also say the Kosa Sage of the Tuyuhun should be ranked among the top three. There’s also Hulugu—if he’s grown stronger over all

these years, it's possible he could compete for the number one position the next time he enters the Central Plains."

After this speech, Yu Shengyan saw that his master was continuing along their path, and he couldn't help but add, "Shizun, today's duel between Kunye and Shen Qiao will surely be another rare and exciting battle. Shen Qiao is a recluse, and he's fought even less since he took over leadership of Xuandu's Violet Palace. He only ranks in the top ten on account of his master Qi Fengge's prestigious reputation. If Shizun wishes to see the true extent of Xuandu Mountain's strength, today's battle is not to be missed. I imagine the summit of Yinghui Peak is already packed full with martial experts who've come to watch!"

"Did you think that I came here today to watch the battle?" Yan Wushi finally paused his steps.

Yu Shengyan was a bit flustered. "Then, what does Shizun mean to do?"

He'd entered discipleship beneath Yan Wushi at only seven years old. Then, three years later, Yan Wushi had lost a battle to the grandmaster of the demonic sects, Cui Youwang. Injured, Yan Wushi entered seclusion—a seclusion that lasted a decade.

During that time, Yu Shengyan continued his training according to Yan Wushi's instructions and also traveled to many places. His progress put him far beyond where he'd been before; he'd entered the ranks of first-class martial artists within the jianghu[3] long ago. But inevitably, because he hadn't seen his master in ten years, there was a sense of estrangement and unfamiliarity between them. Moreover, Yan Wushi's martial expertise had only grown more profound while he was away, and so the awe within Yu Shengyan's heart had grown deeper along with it. So much so that the usual bold and untrammeled behavior that others saw from him became restrained and tentative in his shizun's company.

Yan Wushi clasped his hands behind his back. "I've already seen the battle between Qi Fengge and Hulugu," he said, tone indifferent. "Shen Qiao and Kunye are their disciples, and they are still young. No matter how strong they are, they can't surpass the grand spectacle of that year's Qi-Hu match. I brought you here because of the fast-flowing waters and the treacherous terrain, which connects to the energies of the sky and the spirits

of the earth. This makes it most suitable for training and enlightenment. While I was in seclusion, I had no time to look after you, but now that I've left, I cannot leave you to loiter and stagnate at your current level of progress. Before you comprehend the fifth stage of the *Fenglin Scriptures*, you shall stay here."

Yu Shengyan suddenly felt a bit wounded. Though he had spent these past ten years traveling here and there, he hadn't dared to neglect his training, not even for a day. Now he was only in his early twenties but had already attained the *Fenglin Scriptures*' fourth stage. In the jianghu, he was considered one of the few martial experts of the younger generation, so he'd been quite satisfied. But now it seemed his shizun saw no merit in any of this.

As if sensing his disciple's emotions, the corner of Yan Wushi's mouth tugged up in a mocking smile. "When I was your age, I had already broken through the sixth stage. What do you have to be proud of? Instead of comparing yourself to those small fry, why not compare yourself to me?"

Although the hair at Yan Wushi's temples was peppered with white, it didn't detract from his charm. In fact, that shadow of a smile made it even harder for anyone to avert their eyes from his handsome face.

His white robe, long and loose, flapped and rustled in the blustering wind, but he remained as stalwart and unmoving as ever. He simply stood there with his hands behind his back, but radiating from him was an invisible aura of all-encompassing disdain, both intimidating and crushing.

As Yu Shengyan stood opposite him, a suffocating pressure engulfed him from the front, forcing him two steps back. "Shizun is a heavenly talent, how can this disciple dare to compare himself with you?" he said, reverent and fearful.

"Greet me with the most powerful attack you can think of. I want to see how far you've progressed over the years."

Yu Shengyan had not been tested in martial arts since he'd left seclusion. The order left him a little hesitant, although somewhat eager as well. But when he saw the flash of impatience on Yan Wushi's face, his single trace of hesitation vanished.

“Then, please forgive this disciple’s rudeness!” As the words fell from his lips, his body moved as he willed it and his sleeves rose. Moving too swiftly to be seen, he was already in front of Yan Wushi.

Yu Shengyan raised an arm, his palm striking forth. To a bystander, it would appear there was no force behind this movement—it looked as gentle as if he were plucking flowers on a spring day, or whisking away dust on an autumn night—airy and light, without a wisp of firepower.

Only those in the thick of things would feel that palm’s might. In a meter-wide radius around him, the grass and trees bowed, the river waters reversed, waves swelled, and foam leapt as massive air currents erupted, and all this power surged towards Yan Wushi!

These were currents capable of suspending rivers and overturning seas, yet when they reached Yan Wushi, they seemed to be blocked by an invisible barrier. The hurtling current split into two and veered off to either side.

He still stood in the same spot as before, completely unmoved. Only when Yu Shengyan’s palm was right before his eyes did he indifferently extend a single finger.

Only one finger, and no more.

And with just this finger, Yu Shengyan’s attack was frozen in midair.

Yu Shengyan felt the winds from his palm strike suddenly reverse and roar towards him in a counter-current many times more powerful than his own. Alarmed, he used the current’s momentum and hastily retreated.

With this one retreat, he reeled back ten steps.

Only after he’d found his footing upon a rock did he finally speak, still a bit shocked and shaky. “This disciple thanks Shizun for his mercy!”

Yu Shengyan had been quite confident when he used his palm strike—few people in all the jianghu could withstand it.

And yet, with just one finger, Yan Wushi forced him to withdraw his palm to protect himself.

Fortunately, his shizun was merely testing his progress and hadn’t pressed his advantage. If it had been an enemy…

Yu Shengyan broke out in a cold sweat at the thought; he couldn't help it. He didn't dare to be so self-assured anymore.

Yan Wushi had achieved his goal. Now that he'd given Yu Shengyan a wake-up call, he didn't bother saying much more. "Don't waste your superb talents. In a few days I will travel to the Göktürk Khaganate. Once you've mastered the fifth stage here, if you have nothing to do, go and find your shixiong.[4] Don't wander about traveling too much."

"Yes," Yu Shengyan said reverently.

"The scenery here is sculpted by nature and is seldom visited," said Yan Wushi. "I wish to take a tour around, so you need not…"

Before he could finish, a series of noises came from a short distance overhead. The two of them followed the sounds and looked up to see a man plummeting down, as if he'd fallen from high above. He hurtled through layer after layer of branches before finally crashing to a stop at the bottom of the cliff. Even Yu Shengyan had to gasp at the muffled thump of his landing.

Surely even a Xiantian expert would be hard-pressed to survive a fall from a mountain peak that high?

What was more, this man certainly wouldn't have fallen off the cliff for no reason. He must have been seriously injured, even before the fall.

"Shizun?" Yu Shengyan looked to Yan Wushi for instructions.

"Go over and take a look," he said.

The man's Daoist robe was slashed through in many places, probably because it tore against the branches and rock face during his fall. His flesh was a mosaic of overlapping bloodstains and fresh wounds, making it hard to even discern his appearance.

He had lost consciousness already, unable to keep hold of the sword in his hand. When he'd hit the ground, the sword followed suit and had landed nearby.

"The bones all over his body have probably been shattered."
Yu Shengyan frowned and inspected him for a while, clicking his tongue in sympathy. Then he went to check his pulse. There, he felt what seemed like a glimmer of life.

But even if you could save a man in this state, he would probably be better off dead.

Yu Shengyan was from a demonic sect after all—he might have been young, but his kindness was limited. So, even though he had a Pill of Great Revival on hand, he had no intention of giving it to this injured man.

It was just…

"Shizun, today is the date of the duel between Shen Qiao and Kunye. This man fell down from above, where the duel is being held, could he be…"

Yan Wushi walked over. Instead of looking at the man, he picked up the sword.

The blade was as cold as autumn water and wholly undamaged. As it reflected the river and the mists, subtle ripples seemed to dance across its surface. Near the hilt were four small characters, carved there in seal script.

Yu Shengyan came over to take a look. "Ah, the Shanhe Tongbei[5] sword! It's the sword of the Xuandu Violet Palace's sect leader. This man really *is* Shen Qiao!"

He looked back in disbelief at the grievously injured man, so close to death—Shen Qiao. "Qi Fengge's abilities were the best in the world. Shen Qiao was his personal disciple, *and* he rose to lead Xuandu Mountain. How could he lose so completely?"

Yu Shengyan squatted in front of Shen Qiao and frowned. "Could Kunye's martial arts have grown to surpass even his master Hulugu's?"

If any other person from Xuandu Mountain had fallen, Yan Wushi wouldn't even give them a second glance. But Shen Qiao, the sect leader, was a special case.

He tossed the sword Shanhe Tongbei to Yu Shengyan, then looked at Shen Qiao's unrecognizable countenance for another moment. Finally, an enigmatic smile crept across Yan Wushi's face.

"First, take out the Pill of Great Revival and give it to him."

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Chapter 2:
Blind Man

OF COURSE, Yan Wushi would never deign to carry some grievously injured, dying man on his own back, even if that person was the sect leader of Xuandu Mountain.

Bearing such burdens was what disciples were for. Therefore, the task fell to Yu Shengyan.

Huanyue Sect had a spare villa in Funing County, which was near Banbu Peak. Since nearly every bone in Shen Qiao's body was shattered, it was no simple affair for Yu Shengyan to carry him on his back. He also had to be extra conscious of his strength to avoid further aggravating Shen Qiao's injuries. Even though Yu Shengyan's footwork and qinggong[6] were first rate, it still took him almost an hour to arrive at the villa.

Yan Wushi had gone on ahead of him; at this moment, he was already languidly sipping tea.

"Shizun, do you really want to save Shen Qiao?" After making arrangements for the man, Yu Shengyan came over to report.

"You don't think I should?" Yan Wushi asked in return.

"Nine-tenths of his tendons and meridians[7] have snapped, and his bones are shattered in multiple places. A small portion of his internal breathing[8] may remain, but even if we can save him, it'll be hard for him to recover his martial arts. Not to mention that he cracked open the back of his head when he landed, so he might even wake up an idiot!"

Yan Wushi gave a small, cold smile. "Qi Fengge's disciple, the head of Xuandu Mountain. He stood at the summit of the Daoist discipline, commanding the land in boundless glory. Yet with one defeat, he's been rendered less than an invalid. Even if he returns to Xuandu Mountain, he can no longer be sect leader. Once he awakens and understands his situation, I wonder how he will feel?"

Yu Shengyan sighed. “That’s true. Even ordinary people wouldn’t be able to accept such a nosedive, let alone someone beloved by the heavens like Shen Qiao. The higher you stand, the harder you fall!”

Then he became doubtful. “But then again, Shen Qiao *is* Qi Fengge’s disciple, and he *was* capable enough to ascend the ranks at Xuandu Mountain and stand among the world’s top ten, so his skills *must* have been extraordinary. Even if Kunye did defeat him, how could it have been a defeat this crushing? Could Kunye’s martial prowess be even greater than Hulugu’s was twenty years ago?”

Yan Wushi smiled once more. “When Shen Qiao wakes up, if he hasn’t turned into an idiot, you can ask him.”

Yu Shengyan had noticed that his shizun’s mood seemed to have improved, and his smiles grown more frequent, since they’d picked up Shen Qiao. But he was under no illusion that Shizun was fond of Shen Qiao. After all, Yan Wushi had barely even given Shen Qiao a second look when they first found him.

“By saving Shen Qiao, does Shizun wish to put Xuandu Mountain in our debt?” Yu Shengyan asked tentatively.

Yan Wushi was in high spirits. “If he had died in defeat, all his troubles would have died with him. But now, when he wakes up and realizes that he is not only alive, but that he’s also lost everything he once had—grievously injured, his strength destroyed, and martial arts no more. How will he feel, then? The greater one’s prestige and authority, the less they can withstand such a blow. His heart and mind will certainly break. And when they do, I will take him under my wing. I’ll gradually train the once-sanctimonious and tenderhearted sect leader of Xuandu Mountain into a disciple of the demonic discipline. In the eyes of the world, he will become someone completely immoral. Wouldn’t that be terribly interesting?”

His words left Yu Shengyan dumbfounded. “…What if he does wake up an idiot?”

“Then bury him alive. Anywhere will do.” Yan Wushi replied, flippant.

Yu Shengyan had always known that Shizun was capricious, and the kind of man who did as he pleased. But he'd had little chance these past years to experience firsthand what he'd solely heard from the mouths of others. Only now, witnessing it, did he realize how true such assessments had been.

Practitioners of the demonic discipline were fickle in their conduct, driven purely by self-interest. In the end, Yu Shengyan was a disciple of Huanyue Sect, one of the three demonic sects. He would never have been merciful enough to save Shen Qiao if there was nothing in it for him.

"Shizun, Shen Qiao is of very special status, so why aren't we exchanging him for a favor from Xuandu Mountain? Surely they can't leave their own sect leader to wander around as a vagrant, even if only for the sake of their sect's reputation?"

Yan Wushi sneered faintly. If his eldest disciple Bian Yanmei were standing here, he would never have asked such a childish and ridiculous question. Yu Shengyan was still a bit too green.

But he was in a good mood today and didn't begrudge an answer. "Shen Qiao ranks within the world's top ten martial artists, as you know. Even though he was a recluse, and few have seen him fight, still he was someone who could take up Qi Fengge's mantle. So, how unskilled could he be? After all, Kunye is no Hulugu, who's joined the ranks of Xiantian experts. Shen Qiao should have walked away from this duel unscathed, even if he did lose to Kunye. So why did he suffer such a terrible defeat?"

It turned out that Yu Shengyan wasn't a complete fool. Hearing this, he said, "Something unexpected must have happened during the duel. And if that something was Xuandu Mountain's fault, then if we hand Shen Qiao over to them, they might not thank us for it. In which case, not only would we not earn any favor, we might even bring down trouble on our own heads."

So, he wasn't entirely beyond help. Yan Wushi looked askance at him. "With me here, Huanyue Sect need not concern ourselves with the opinions of others, let alone exchange for any favors." Shen Qiao might have been of extraordinary status, but to Yan Wushi, he was no more than a novel plaything.

It was an incredibly imperious thing to say, but Yan Wushi could pull it off.

Ten years ago, he'd battled Cui Youwang, and although he'd suffered injuries and defeat, Cui Youwang hadn't escaped unscathed either. Back then, Cui Youwang's power was already unfathomable, even on par with Qi Fengge's. Ten years later, Cui Youwang and Qi Fengge were dead, and Yan Wushi had broken through the *Fenglin Scriptures*' ninth stage and risen to even greater heights. It was impossible to know how far he'd progressed just yet, but he surely wasn't below where he'd been ten years ago.

Scant few people had yet learned of his reappearance in the jianghu. Otherwise, things would be much livelier. The world's top ten rankings would definitely need an update too.

When he thought of that, Yu Shengyan's eyes grew hot with excitement. "While Shizun was in seclusion, Hehuan Sect came around looking for trouble twice every three days," he said. "This disciple fought with Sang Jingxing once and was injured, so he had to leave Fenglin Province and travel far into the jianghu. That's why he traveled about for so many years. But fortunately, your esteemed self has returned…"

What outsiders called demonic sects, or the demonic discipline, was in truth a blanket term.

Initially, the demonic discipline referred to the practitioners of Riyue Mountain's Riyue Sect in Fenglin Province, but later Riyue Sect splintered into three branches: Huanyue Sect, Hehuan Sect, and Fajing Sect. Although the three branches were all part of the demonic discipline, they were at odds with each other. Their clashes were extensive and endless, both overt and covert.

After Yan Wushi entered seclusion ten years ago, Hehuan Sect had eyed up the leaderless Huanyue Sect and aspired to absorb it. However, the disciples of Huanyue Sect were always scattered, and the sect itself was uncentralized. Furthermore, Bian Yanmei was cautious and low-key with his actions—he couldn't defeat the likes of Yuan Xiuxiu or Sang Jingxing, but he covertly stirred up a fair bit of trouble for Hehuan Sect. Thus their efforts canceled each other out, so Hehuan Sect hadn't gained much for their trouble.

Instead, it was Yu Shengyan who'd gotten the short end of the stick several times, owing to his youth and late entry into the sect.

Now that Yan Wushi was out of seclusion, the members of Huanyue Sect were like lost children who'd found their mother. Naturally, Yu Shengyan was overcome with joy.

"Ordinary servants won't be able to tend to Shen Qiao's injuries, so stay here and look after him for a few days until he wakes," said Yan Wushi. "Then return to Banbu Peak, and make sure to master the *Fenglin Scriptures*' fifth stage."

Yu Shengyan respectfully responded, "This disciple obeys."

***

Shen Qiao was badly injured, but the wounds on his face were mostly scratches from when he'd fallen. Once the blood was cleaned off, his original appearance was revealed.

Neither the abrasions on his face, nor the circle of gauze around his head could detract from his handsome beauty. From the curve of his nose to his tightly closed lips, all his features carried an air of aloof restraint. He looked very much like what anyone would expect from one of Xuandu Mountain's Daoist practitioners—someone far removed from the common people.

It wasn't hard to imagine how much brighter his splendor might shine once his eyes finally opened.

Of course, Yu Shengyan wasn't exactly ugly himself—he was one of Yan Wushi's disciples, after all, and Yan Wushi didn't take on ugly disciples. He'd seen many peerless beauties during his travels, but he still spent a long moment staring at Shen Qiao's bruised and battered face in a daze. Only afterwards did he pick up the ointment and begin applying it to him, all while sighing on the inside.

Broken bones could be set and meridians could be rejoined, but badly injured internal organs were not so simple to repair. Even worse, his cultivation had been greatly degraded—from now on, he might be even

weaker than a common man. When Yu Shengyan tried to imagine losing all his hard-earned martial arts in a single night, his mind rebelled at the idea. And in Shen Qiao's situation, the shock would be even greater.

Such a pity. Yu Shengyan muttered to himself, looking at that pale, bloodless face and shaking his head.

Yan Wushi had only stepped in to save Shen Qiao on a whim. Now that the man was saved, all responsibility had been tossed onto Yu Shengyan, and Yan Wushi didn't bother showing the slightest interest.

Funing County was small and didn't normally attract many visitors, but because the battle at Banbu Peak had been so famously sensational, these days there were quite a few jianghu travelers stopping there to rest for the night after coming from Banbu Peak. Yu Shengyan was able to gather a fair bit of news from them even with only the occasional trip outside.

For example: the duel between Shen Qiao and Kunye had been extremely thrilling, but unfortunately Shen Qiao was no Qi Fengge. It was said that he was far below his master's level, while Kunye was well on the way to surpassing the prowess Hulugu had possessed twenty years ago. Thus, Daoist Master Shen wasn't just defeated but also thrown off the cliff, and not even his bones had survived.

It was rumored that before the duel, many tempers had flamed with righteous indignation at Kunye's brazen challenge to Shen Qiao. Some were eager to fight him themselves, to smash the Göktürks' arrogance. But after the battle, when they saw Xuandu Mountain utterly defeated, the people who'd wanted to stand up all scampered away, too afraid to take a swing at Kunye.

With the match, Kunye's reputation had soared. He'd replaced Shen Qiao and ascended to the top ten. It was said that on this visit to the Central Plains, he would challenge their martial experts one by one, and his next target was likely Buddhist Master Xueting of Zhou.

The land had not been unified since the Jin's mass migration to the south and the Uprising of the Five Barbarians. Now Zhou and Qi were in the north, the Chen Dynasty was in the south, and the Göktürks and Tuyuhun each occupied vast stretches of land along the borders, while sects and families all served their own masters.

As the leader of the Daoist sects, Xuandu Mountain had been firmly neutral since Qi Fengge's time and did not involve themselves in worldly power struggles. Now that Shen Qiao had been defeated by Kunye and his fate was unknown, no one knew who'd succeed him as the leader of Xuandu Mountain, nor did they know if that successor would carry on the neutral stance of the previous generations. If they did not, the balance of the world would shift.

But the protagonist at the center of this vortex remained lying in bed while these rumors swirled, with Yu Shengyan and the villa's servants applying his medicine and changing his clothes for him every day. Devoid of thought or consciousness, of joy or sorrow, he was completely unaware of the happenings in the outside world.

It wasn't until half a month later that he made his first movement.

Hastily summoned by the servants, Yu Shengyan watched as Shen Qiao slowly opened his eyes.

"You've been badly injured," he said. "And your broken bones haven't mended yet, so it's best you stay still."

The other man frowned a little, his lips opening and closing as if he wanted to say something. Then a blank look came over his face.

Surely the fall hadn't actually turned him into an idiot?

Yu Shengyan pondered while he asked, "Do you remember what your name is?"

The other man gave a sluggish blink, then slowly shook his head, the movement so slight it was almost imperceptible.

Amnesia? That was to be expected. After all, his head had suffered severe trauma. Yu Shengyan still remembered the day he'd carried Shen Qiao back, and how there'd been a gaping gash on the back of his head so long and deep, he could nearly see the dense white skull inside.

"This friend…" Shen Qiao spoke with extreme effort. Yu Shengyan moved closer to listen. "There is only darkness before my eyes. Perhaps I cannot see…"

Yu Shengyan was shocked. Shen Qiao hadn't woken up an idiot, instead he'd woken up blind?

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Chapter 3:
A Game

"YOUR NAME is Shen Qiao. You were a disciple of our Huanyue Sect, and you suffered a great injury somehow. Fortunately, I happened to pass by and find you, and we managed to save you just in time. The enemies who hurt you were from Hehuan Sect—I was no match for them on my own, so I brought you here first. Once you've healed up and recovered your martial arts, we'll go back and take revenge on them."

Yu Shengyan rattled off this nonsense with a straight face, but Shen Qiao listened to it all, solemn and intent.

At the end he asked, "Then…how should I address you?"

"My surname is Yu, Yu Shengyan. I am your shixiong."

These words defied all decency. Yu Shengyan was in his early twenties. While Shen Qiao's appearance didn't show his age, he was Qi Fengge's disciple, and he'd led Xuandu Mountain for five years. How could he possibly be younger than Yu Shengyan?

It was an obvious ploy on Yu Shengyan's part, taking advantage of Shen Qiao's blindness to earn an undue address.

But Shen Qiao followed his lead obediently. "Greetings, Shixiong."

Looking into that kind and honest face, Yu Shengyan inexplicably felt the smallest twinge of guilt.

He tried to brush aside the topic. "That's a good boy. Since you can't get up yet, just stay on your back and recuperate. Once you're healed, I'll bring you to pay respects to our master."

"All right," said Shen Qiao.

He closed his eyes but then reopened them a moment later. His eyes didn't focus, so they appeared vacant, his gaze spiritless. "Shixiong…?"

"Is there something else?"

Yu Shengyan knew he had a soft spot for beauties. When he saw Shen Qiao—the glorious sect leader who'd sat at the helm of the world's Daoist sects—fallen into such dire straits, he thought again that it was such an awful misfortune. Shen Qiao was truly pitiful. If the past him were here instead, with his sect in hand and his martial arts at its peak, how majestic would that be?

"I wish to drink some water…"

"Don't drink any water for now, the medicine will be ready in a moment. For the time being, you must take medicine as your water."

Just as he'd said this, a maid came over with the medicine. Perhaps the wild backstory he'd woven for Shen Qiao just now had aroused his rare sense of guilt, because Yu Shengyan took the bowl in hand, asked the maid to prop Shen Qiao's neck up with a pillow, and then personally fed him the medicine, spoon by spoon.

Though Shen Qiao's bones weren't completely shattered, they came close. His muscles, tendons, and meridians were all gravely injured, and he'd been on the verge of losing his life. It was only on account of his strong foundations that he awakened in less than a month. He'd have to stay in bed for three more months if he was to have any hope of recovery.

Yu Shengyan had endured much hardship beneath Yan Wushi when it came to training, but outside of training, the disciple's lifestyle was no hardship at all. Demonic sects were always extravagant, so his food, clothing, and spending rivaled that of a rich family's young master. Spoon-feeding medicine to someone was far out of his wheelhouse. No matter how careful he was, the occasional drop still splattered onto Shen Qiao's lapel, but Shen Qiao continued to drink spoonful after spoonful without any expression of dissatisfaction. Once he was finished, he even smiled in gratitude. "Thank you, Shixiong."

Gentle and well behaved, handsome and amiable.

The curve of his smile wasn't broad, but it was enough to tint his pale face with warmth. The maid at his side flushed quietly and quickly averted her eyes.

Shen Qiao didn't ask any questions, and that's what Yu Shengyan found strange. If he'd been the one to wake up without his memories, while

blind, injured, and unable to get out of bed, then even if he managed to keep his spirit from breaking, he certainly couldn't have stayed this calm.

"Why haven't you asked me when you'll recover?"

"With Shixiong and Shifu around, you must be rushing about here and there, running yourselves ragged over my situation." Shen Qiao coughed several times, the movement tugging on his wound and eliciting a frown. "If I asked, wouldn't I simply trouble you further?"

Yu Shengyan found himself tongue-tied. Perhaps it was because he'd never seen someone so considerate and thoughtful, or perhaps because he really did feel a little guilty when he looked at that face, but he didn't know what to say. Only after a long moment did he speak again. "Then you should rest properly first. I won't bother you anymore. I'll return tomorrow to give you more medicine."

"Thank you, Shixiong. Please send Shizun my regards as well."

"I will." Yu Shengyan didn't want to drag out the awkwardness any longer. He rubbed his nose, said these words, and left.

He had some doubts about whether Shen Qiao was faking his amnesia, but he visited Shen Qiao daily, and his patient was always the same as when he'd first awakened: gentle, optimistic, and full of gratitude toward Yu Shengyan.

Whatever Yu Shengyan said, Shen Qiao accepted it all without question, as honest and straightforward as a blank sheet of paper.

Once he was able to get out of bed and move around a little, Shen Qiao even proposed to personally visit his "shizun" Yan Wushi, to thank him.

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If not for Yu Shengyan's reminder, Yan Wushi would have forgotten about Shen Qiao entirely.

During his ten years of seclusion, the world had undergone drastic changes. It was far more than he could be briefed on in just a couple of

sentences.

There were many sects in the world, each backing different political powers and regimes.

The Gao clan of Qi was known for their erratic and outlandish behavior, and many generations of their emperors had held intimate ties with demonic sects. Ever since Gao Wei became emperor, he'd grown close to Hehuan Sect, and so Hehuan Sect's influence within Qi had surged as well.

Back when Yuwen Hu was in control of Zhou, he'd revered Buddhism. That's why Buddhist Master Xueting had been honored as State Preceptor of Zhou. However, after Yuwen Yong came to power, the winds shifted. The new emperor believed in neither Daoism nor Buddhism, and even prohibited both by imperial edict. As a result, the influence of Buddhism greatly declined.

As for the Chen Dynasty in the south, it was led by the Confucian Linchuan Academy. Its master Ruyan Kehui was single-minded in his service to the Emperor of Chen, and in return, the emperor relied on him heavily.

Before Yan Wushi had gone into seclusion, he served as an official in Zhou under another identity—as an assistant to the then Duke of Lu, Yuwen Yong. But when he was wounded in a battle with Cui Youwang, he was forced to flee. Before leaving, he instructed his eldest disciple, Bian Yanmei, to stay by Yuwen Yong's side.

Now that he had re-emerged, he'd have to make a trip to Zhou and pay a visit to Yuwen Yong, who'd ascended to emperor after seizing his authority back from Yuwen Hu.

In recent years, Zhou had amassed power little by little, which none of the other countries were pleased to see. Not only that, but the three schools of thought weren't on good terms with the Emperor of Zhou either. Yuwen Yong prohibited Buddhism and Daoism, and had also denied the Confucians the right to set up lectures within Zhou, which prevented them from mass-recruiting disciples.

It was amid these circumstances that Huanyue Sect courted Yuwen Yong with their support, and Yuwen Yong came to need Huanyue Sect to

maintain his rule.

After meeting with Yuwen Yong, Yan Wushi left Northern Zhou and made a side trip to Xuandu Mountain to meet Kunye, the rumored number one martial expert of the Göktürks and the vanquisher of Shen Qiao.

They fought a match that ended in Kunye's defeat. Yan Wushi's moniker "Demon Lord" resurfaced in the jianghu, and both heaven and earth shuddered. Rumors abounded that another terrifying powerhouse had emerged from the demonic sects to fill the void left by Cui Youwang.

But now that Qi Fengge was gone, one less person could stand as his equal.

In Yan Wushi's opinion, while Kunye was certainly skilled and adequately talented, his was still a far cry from Hulugu's past performance. Even compared to other famous members of the current top ten, Kunye wasn't outstanding. The fact that he'd injured Xuandu Mountain's sect leader so grievously was a strange thing in itself.

However, this was not his main concern. The true story behind Shen Qiao's injuries, and if it was related to Kunye—Yan Wushi had no interest in learning more about either. The only reason he'd targeted Kunye was so that everyone would know he'd resurfaced in the jianghu. Kunye was in the limelight after defeating Xuandu Mountain's sect leader, so he was the most suitable choice.

Even more importantly, Yan Wushi's greatest gain during this trip was not making a name for himself or defeating Kunye but learning the whereabouts of one of the *Zhuyang Strategy* scrolls.

Legend held that fifty years ago, Tao Hongjing, a grandmaster of his generation, met an immortal on Mount Mao and was granted the *Dengzhen Instructions*. That book contained four parts, and Tao Hongjing organized three of them into a manual called the *Dengzhen Concealed Instructions*.

As for the small remaining part, Tao Hongjing fashioned it into a separate book because its contents were cryptic, relating mainly to the union of man and heaven through cultivation. To this he added his lifetime of learnings and the key points of his understanding, and all together they later became the renowned *Zhuyang Strategy*.

Tao Hongjing was a man of great learning. Though he was a Daoist priest by trade, he was proficient in all three schools of thought, and he'd also received the lifelong learnings of Immortal Master Sun Youyue from Danyang. Taken together, this knowledge transformed his martial arts beyond perfection. Even Qi Fengge was forced to admit defeat. Tao Hongjing was the undisputed number one in the world.

Of course, considering these origins, everybody was dying to read the *Zhuyang Strategy*. It was said that if one could comprehend all five volumes of the *Zhuyang Strategy*, they'd finally be able to glimpse the zenith sought by all martial artists throughout the ages, grasp it, and break through to a new echelon beyond all others. It might even be possible to ascend to the heavens as an immortal.

Unfortunately, after Tao Hongjing passed on, Mount Mao's Shangqing Sect became embroiled in dynastic politics. Each disciple had their own stance and position, and as the Liang Dynasty fell into civil strife, the five volumes of the *Zhuyang Strategy* were scattered throughout the land, their whereabouts unknown.

Things didn't change until decades later, when Qi Fengge himself admitted the truth about his martial arts—that beyond inheriting the legacy of Xuandu Mountain, he'd also benefited from the *Zhuyang Strategy*. After that, the locations of the *Zhuyang Strategy* were brought to light one after another. One volume was said to be hidden by Zhou, one was with Tiantai Sect, and another with Xuandu Mountain. But the last two remained a mystery. There'd been no news for decades, and all searching proved fruitless.

Years ago, Yan Wushi had chanced upon the *Zhuyang Strategy* volume that was hidden within Zhou Palace. His incredible progress after his seclusion, his great leap in cultivation, was partially due to that very *Zhuyang Strategy* volume.

Only those who experienced it personally could understand the *Zhuyang Strategy*'s sheer brilliance. One glimpse granted a hundred insights. The *Zhuyang Strategy* encapsulated Tao Hongjing's lifelong work, integrating the mental cultivation techniques and martial arts of all three schools of thought. The parts were complementary, their union flawless. If Yan Wushi could see the remaining four volumes, then not only might the

supreme martial arts be within his grasp, but even the stuff of legends might become possible for him. Unraveling the natural laws, becoming one with heaven, all of it.

Such was Yan Wushi's original motive for his excursion. While Xuandu Mountain was leaderless and panicked, he would steal inside and search for the *Zhuyang Strategy* scroll. But he didn't expect that this quirk of fate would lead him to discover something else. During their match, he realized that although Kunye's moves traced back to the Western Regions, the source of his internal cultivation[9] and true qi[10] seemed different. In fact, they seemed, almost imperceptibly, to share a source with Yan Wushi's. It was this that led him to suspect that the reason Hulugu had nearly matched Qi Fengge in power, lagging barely a step behind, was almost certainly because he'd gotten help from the *Zhuyang Strategy*.

Kunye was one of the Göktürks' new generation of martial experts. Given time, he might end up on the same level Hulugu had occupied—if merging the Western Regions' cultivation techniques with the *Zhuyang Strategy* could create one Hulugu, then of course it could create a second.

This greatly aroused Yan Wushi's interest. For some time after their duel, he followed Kunye doggedly, picking fights with him whenever the mood arose. Kunye couldn't defeat him and had no chance of escape. On the verge of a nervous breakdown, he finally chose to return to the Göktürks.

Yan Wushi didn't plan to chase him all way to the Khaganate, so for the time being he made his leisurely way back to the villa.

The moment he returned, he heard his disciple say that Shen Qiao had woken and that he could get out of bed and walk.

Shen Qiao was leaning on a bamboo cane when he came to see Yan Wushi. He approached, step by step, his movements slow but very steady.

A maid was at his side, supporting him. She whispered quietly to him, pointing out the path through the villa.

"Greetings, Shizun." Once the maid indicated the correct direction, Shen Qiao bowed towards where Yan Wushi sat.

"Sit." Yan Wushi put down the weiqi[11] piece he'd been holding. Opposite him was Yu Shengyan, crushing misery written all over his face. Some heartfelt relief was mixed in as well, though—he was obviously losing the game.

Shen Qiao sat down with the help of the maid.

After he'd woken, his memories were vague, so much so that he couldn't remember his own name or his past. And of course he had absolutely no recollection of Yan Wushi and Yu Shengyan.

"How are your injuries healing?" asked Yan Wushi.

"Many thanks to Shizun for his concern. This disciple can already get out of bed and walk, but his limbs are still weak, and his martial arts…have yet to recover, it seems."

"Hand," ordered Yan Wushi.

Shen Qiao held out his hand obediently, and Yan Wushi immediately pinched both his wrist and gate of life.[12] He examined them for a moment, and a trace of surprise flitted across his impassive face.

He gave Shen Qiao a meaningful glance. Because Shen Qiao couldn't see, his expression remained guileless and vacant.

Yan Wushi asked, "Do you feel any discomfort?"

Shen Qiao thought for a moment. "Every night at midnight, my body grows hot and cold, and there's a dull pain in my chest. Sometimes it's so

painful that I can barely walk."

Yu Shengyan added, "This disciple had a doctor look at it. They said that it was probably to do with Shidi's[13] serious injuries and that his recuperation will take time."

Yan Wushi sneered a little at how smooth that *Shidi* had been. Then he said to Shen Qiao, "Your martial arts aren't completely lost. I felt a wisp of true qi within your body. It was not strong, but neither was it weak, so recovery may be possible with time. However, my Huanyue Sect has no place for worthless idlers. I have an errand for your shixiong, and you should follow along and lend him a hand."

"Of course," said Shen Qiao.

He didn't ask what the errand was. It was exactly how he'd been with Yu Shengyan—he agreed to whatever was said. The rest of the time he only sat there quietly, making no unnecessary movements.

In his current state, Shen Qiao was a fallen tiger, but Yan Wushi felt no sympathy for his plight. The man's misfortune only ignited an even stronger malice within him. More and more, he wanted to dye that pure white completely black, to ruin it.

"Then go back to your room first, and rest," he said airily.

Shen Qiao obediently rose and bowed to excuse himself and then left, slowly, with the maid's assistance.

Yan Wushi pulled his gaze from Shen Qiao's back and said to Yu Shengyan, "You need not rush to Banbu Peak for now. Make a trip directly to Qi and kill the Grand Master of Remonstrance Yan Zhiwen, along with his entire family."

"Yes." Yu Shengyan accepted without hesitation. "Has that man offended Shizun?"

"He is a member of Hehuan Sect and one of Hehuan Sect's eyes in Qi."

Yu Shengyan was only too excited to hear this. "Yes, Hehuan Sect has strutted around for too long. While you were in seclusion, Yuan Xiuxiu repeatedly made trouble for Huanyue Sect. If we don't return the favor, our

Huanyue Sect would look awfully soft, wouldn't we? This disciple will set out in a few days!"

Then he paused, his smile fading just a touch. "Shizun wants me to bring Shen Qiao along?" he asked, doubtful. "He's lost all his martial arts, so I fear he won't be much help at all."

The shadow of a smile crept across Yan Wushi's face. "Since you have called him 'Shidi,' you should at least take him to see the world. His martial arts may not have recovered, but he can still kill a person or two."

Yu Shengyan understood, then. His master was treating Shen Qiao like a sheet of white paper, one that he wanted to dye a solid black. Even if Shen Qiao came to his senses or recovered his memory one day, anything he'd already done would be irrevocable. At that point, it would be impossible to return to the righteous path, even if he wanted to.

And what was wrong with being like them, anyway? They acted without constraints, did whatever they wanted, and were free from the laws and conventions of the world. Yu Shengyan believed that it was human nature to be evil. Deep down, he thought, everyone possessed a dark side. The only difference was whether that darkness had the chance to awaken. Those so-called Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian ideologies went on and on about benevolence and virtue, morality and compassion, but in the end, they were just using righteousness to paper over their own selfish desires. There was even less to be said about struggles for the throne—might makes right and winner takes all. Was there any country whose ruler's hands weren't soaked in blood? Who could claim they were cleaner than the rest?

"Yes, this disciple will make sure to guide Shidi well."

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Chapter 4:
Getting to Know the Beauty

YU SHENGYAN didn't explain the purpose of their trip to Shen Qiao when they first set out.

Funing County wasn't too far from Yecheng, the capital of Qi. At Yu Shengyan's normal speed, he could get there in three to five days. But, out of consideration for Shen Qiao's health, he set a slower pace, and they took seven days to arrive in Yecheng.

Shen Qiao's current condition was still unsuited for long trips, though, even one taken at such a leisurely pace. Right after they arrived in Yecheng, he fell ill with a low fever.

Huanyue Sect didn't have many disciples, but they didn't lack for money. The sect owned a house in Yecheng, which is where Yu Shengyan and Shen Qiao stayed. Yan Wushi was the owner of the house, so when the servants saw Yu Shengyan and Shen Qiao, they addressed them as young masters and made fitting arrangements for them with utmost care.

Shen Qiao spoke little during their travels. He'd walk, stop when Yu Shengyan told him to, and never mentioned his illness—Yu Shengyan had to discover it for himself. When he'd asked, Shen Qiao just smiled and said, "I know that this trip is to complete an errand Shizun assigned. I'm already very ashamed that my injuries prevent me from helping. How could I burden Shixiong with even more trouble?"

His complexion was pale and clammy, yet he still wore a gentle smile when he spoke. It made him look pitiful, yet charming.

After all, Yu Shengyan was not yet Yan Wushi. A bit of compassion welled up inside him—a rare occurrence.

"You may be ill, but it's no trouble to tell me about it. I'm not an unreasonable person. We do still have to complete Shizun's errand, though. I've already made inquiries. Yan Zhiwen is a Hehuan Sect member, but as a martial artist he's just second rate. Plus, his wives and children know nothing of martial arts. Their household has taken no precautions, so I'll

have no trouble killing him on my own, but Shizun has requested the death of his entire family too. When the time comes, I'll bring you there with me. Once I've killed Yan Zhiwen, I'll grab a woman or child for you to take care of."

This was the first time that Shen Qiao heard what the task Yan Wushi had given them entailed. Surprise colored his face. "May I ask Shixiong about the history of Hehuan Sect? What grudge do we have with Yan Zhiwen?"

Yu Shengyan remembered that Shen Qiao still knew nothing, so he explained. "Our Huanyue Sect, Hehuan Sect, and Fajing Sect, all originate from Fenglin Province's Riyue Sect. When the Riyue Sect fell apart, it split into these three branches. Usually, since we all come from the same source, we'd be united against outsiders. But everyone wants to be the one who reunifies the Noble Discipline,[14] *especially* Hehuan Sect. Their sect leader is called Yuan Xiuxiu, and the disciples there are all just like her—they've always preferred to wield their beauty to satisfy their ambitions. But they're not weak in martial arts either, so you should probably steer clear of them.

"This Yuan Xiuxiu has a lover named Sang Jingxing, who was once Cui Youwang's disciple. Those two vermin work hand in glove together, carrying out their evil schemes day in and day out. While Shizun was in seclusion, they even tried time and time again to annex our Huanyue Sect."

Shen Qiao nodded. "But since Yan Zhiwen is only second-rate within their sect, and he has the status of a Qi official, I imagine that he himself has never made trouble for Huanyue Sect. So why must Shizun go after him?"

Yu Shengyan curled his lips. "Shidi, this injury of yours has turned you soft and naive! Practically a bunny rabbit! Yan Zhiwen is a special case. He's used his identity as a Qi official as a cover, so only a few people know that he's from Hehuan Sect. If we kill him, first, it sends a warning to our enemies and frightens them, and second, Hehuan Sect will understand that we know everything about them. They won't dare make any more brazen moves after that. Third, since they made trouble for us while Shizun was gone, we have to return the favor now that Shizun is back, right? Otherwise, won't everyone think that Huanyue Sect is some kind of pushover? The year Cui Youwang died, Huanyue Sect was the strongest of Riyue Sect's

three branches, and we had the most hope of reunifying the Noble Discipline. It was only because Shizun got injured and was forced to retreat into seclusion that Hehuan Sect even had an opportunity at all."

"Then, what about Fajing Sect? Have they never made trouble for us?" asked Shen Qiao.

"Honestly, out of the three sects, only Hehuan Sect relies on strength in numbers. Fajing Sect is the same as Huanyue Sect: disciples scattered over many locations, each acting on their own. They don't usually gather together. After Shizun left seclusion, he only contacted me alone, and that's why I rushed over. As for you…" He coughed delicately. "Naturally, you're with us because you were injured. So, in short, the three sects don't get along with each other, but only Hehuan Sect keeps making trouble and is the most flagrant about it."

Shen Qiao sighed. "Grudges have a source, and debts a debtor. Since Hehuan Sect is led by Yuan Xiuxiu, why does Shizun not take it up with her directly? Even if you take it up with Yan Zhiwen, his wives and children have no ties to the jianghu, so why involve them?"

Yu Shengyan fiddled with a tassel hanging in front of the bed, unconcerned. "Shizun has given us orders, so all we need to do is follow them. Why ask so many questions? Grass must be pulled up from the roots, or else the spring wind will revive it anew. If we don't kill Yan Zhiwen's wives and children, should we just wait around for them to seek revenge someday?"

After saying this, he stood up. "Anyway, the matter isn't urgent. We've still got a couple of days until the seventh. For the next two days you should rest properly. Once you're well, I'll ask someone to show you around Yecheng. In my opinion, in terms of world capitals, Yecheng is as luxurious as Jiankang, and quite a bit grander. It's worth strolling around, especially the pleasure district…"

Yu Shengyan was only in his early twenties, but he was a real romantic. In Southern Chen, he'd concealed his identity and discussed poetry and verses, befriending famous scholars and making a decent reputation for himself. At the moment, he was in high spirits and was about to go on chatting, but then he considered Shen Qiao's condition. Even if the mood struck, the man wouldn't have the strength to perform. So, Yu

Shengyan held his tongue and gave Shen Qiao a meaningful smile instead. "It's no matter, you have amnesia at the moment, and you can't recall the past. Just so you know, our Huanyue Sect is full of free-spirited, romantic people who do as they please. You can take it slow—you'll have plenty of opportunities to experience everything in the future."

When Yan Wushi traveled, he used the identity of a wealthy merchant with the last name Xie, so the plaque on this house read "Xie Residence."

Yu Shengyan was often absent, leaving Shen Qiao behind alone. Everyone at the residence couldn't help but sympathize with Shen Qiao, since he treated them all with kindness and because he was so sickly and frail.

The maids who served beside him were especially sympathetic. A few days after the two of them arrived, the maids had already grown much closer to Shen Qiao and even tried to relieve his boredom by telling him about the scenery and people around the Qi capital and Xie residence.

Once he was feeling better, and since he had nothing to do, Shen Qiao asked them to take him outside on a couple of excursions. On these, he discovered that Yecheng was indeed as Yu Shengyan had described. White jade lined the streets, the roofs were trimmed with tiles of carved glaze. Qi's Gao clan were Xianbei-acculturated Han by descent, so their buildings and architecture, their clothes and customs, all retained some traditional Xianbei influences. Compared to the refined elegance of the South, here there was a sense of unrestrained vigor. The exact same kind of wine, when sold in Yecheng's liquor stores, tasted stronger and richer than it did in Jiankang.

Wide robes and loose sleeves, fluttering lapels and dancing sashes, exquisite horses and extravagant carriages. Even if Shen Qiao couldn't see, he could feel the capital's glory and prosperity in the fragrance and atmosphere of Yecheng's streets and alleys.

With the maid's assistance, he entered the pharmacy and sat down in the side hall to rest while the maid went to fill the prescription.

The medicine was for Shen Qiao. He had practically become a medicine pot himself: every day he had to imbibe at least one giant bowl of medicinal soup. Although Yan Wushi wasn't about to do the charitable thing and help restore his martial arts, he also hadn't abandoned Shen Qiao to

linger on, half-dead. The medicine he was drinking now was mainly for regulating his qi, blood, and meridians, as well as strengthening his bones and bolstering his yang energy.

At the moment, Shen Qiao's internal energy was completely gone, hollowed out. With his memories missing as well, it was pointless to expect his martial arts to return anytime soon. The fact that he could now walk unhindered and move freely, though, was all thanks to these few months of rest and recuperation.

When the maid had to come out today to get medicine, he'd followed along to catch some fresh air. He could scarcely imagine that, despite his blindness and sickly appearance, he still drew quite a bit of attention while he sat there in the pharmacy.

Shen Qiao had always had a handsome face. Though it was thinner now, his looks and grace remained intact. He was dressed in a plain bamboo-green robe. His hair held no crown and was kept in place with a plain wooden pin. He sat and did nothing, quiet and unspeaking, the corners of his mouth drawn up in a subtle smile as he listened to the maid speak with the pharmacy's shopkeeper.

It seemed Yan Wushi wasn't worried about Shen Qiao being recognized while out and about—he'd allowed him to appear in public and hadn't instructed Yu Shengyan to conceal his appearance at all.

He had no reason to worry, since Shen Qiao rarely came down the mountain to appear in public. Not before he'd become the sect leader, nor after. It was said that even Xuandu Mountain's disciples might not recognize their new sect leader. There had been a few Xuandu Mountain disciples who were famous outside of the sect, but in the end, none of them were selected to lead. Instead, it'd been the relatively unknown Shen Qiao. Probably only Qi Fengge himself knew the reasons why, and he was gone.

What was more, on the day Kunye dueled Shen Qiao, only the two of them stood at the summit of Banbu Peak. Space was limited, so those who came to watch the fight were all on the Yinghui Peak opposite them. There was some distance in between, so onlookers might not have been able to recall Shen Qiao's appearance in detail. And, after his bout of serious illness, Shen Qiao's presence and energy were greatly reduced.

But all this was just speculation on Yu Shengyan's part.

Knowing Shizun's nature, Yu Shengyan privately guessed that Shen Qiao was probably nothing but a whim to Shizun—something for him to manipulate and toy with.

"Sir, I have the medicine now. Shall we go?"

Shen Qiao nodded, and the maid helped him up. The two of them had just made it to the pharmacy entrance when they heard someone say, "This gentleman is so charming and elegant, yet I have never seen him before. May I ask for your esteemed name?"

The owner of the voice did not hide their astonishment. When the maid's steps paused, Shen Qiao knew that they were talking about him.

"This humble one is Shen Qiao," he said.

"So, it's Shen-langjun.[15]" The woman's voice was clear and pleasant, vivacious and bubbly. "Is Shen-langjun from the capital? Or, perhaps, which noble family is he from?"

The maid leaned in, whispering into Shen Qiao's ear. "This is Chief Steward Han's daughter, Han Eying."

Chief Steward Han was Han Feng. He wasn't just the chief steward for someone's house, he was the Palace Attendant of Qi. He was a prominent man in Qi—his son had married a princess, and he himself was known as one of the Three Nobles of Qi, along with Mu Tipo and Gao Anagong. His authority eclipsed the imperial court and common people alike. As the Han family's daughter, Han Eying could have anything she wished.

Shen Qiao said with a smile, "This Shen has long heard of Han-niangzi's[16] renowned name, but he is currently suffering from a disease of the eyes, so he cannot see Han-niangzi's beauty. He hopes you will forgive him. When this Shen recovers from his illness one day, he will come again to visit."

Han Eying had noticed his spiritless gaze. She couldn't help pitying him a bit, mourning how such a beautiful gentleman just had to be blind. Her interest waning, she said, "That's fine, then. You should take good care of yourself. Xiao-Lian, go tell that shopkeeper to bring some ginseng over—let Shen-langjun take it with him. I'll pay for it!"

“Thank you, Han-niangzi,” said Shen Qiao. “This Shen has something for you as well, although it isn’t much of a gift. Please, kindly accept it.”

Han Eying perked back up. “Oh? What is it?”

“A-Miao,[17]” said Shen Qiao. “Bring that box from the carriage over here.”

The maid gave an answer, then hurried to bring over the box Shen Qiao mentioned.

Shen Qiao couldn’t see, but his words were gentle, and his manner of speech was lovely, with a quality that soothed the listener. Even Han Eying, an arrogant and willful rich lady who stopped beautiful men on the streets just to flirt with them, couldn’t help but soften her tone with him.

The maid returned with the box just as Shen Qiao and Han Eying finished their brief exchange and said farewell. Han Eying had asked for Shen Qiao’s address and even said that she’d come to visit some other day. Finally, she mounted her horse and took her leave.

When he returned to the Xie residence, Yu Shengyan heard about the encounter and had to click his tongue in amazement. “You’ve got a real knack. You acquainted yourself with Han Eying after just one trip outside. That girl is the shizhi[18] of Zhao Chiying from Mount Tai’s Bixia Sect. Her martial arts are nothing special, but because of her father’s status, she throws her weight around in the city.”

Shen Qiao smiled. “In my opinion, she’s not too bad. She didn’t particularly throw her weight around.”

Yu Shengyan laughed. “She’s a real beauty, but unfortunately, her personality is unbearable. Everyone in the capital agrees. You’re the only one who says she isn’t bad!”

Shen Qiao smiled but didn’t reply.

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Chapter 5:
Separate Ways

IT WAS ABOUT three days after this little episode, and the day that Yu Shengyan was scheduled to make his move.

The New Year had just come, and the Lantern Festival had yet to arrive, so Yecheng was bursting with a joyful atmosphere.

Yan Zhiwen wasn't a very high-ranking official. Hehuan Sect probably only positioned him there to give themselves more eyes and ears inside the court. He wasn't skilled in martial arts, and he'd taken no precautions for his safety. Even though Yu Shengyan was just a disciple, Yan Zhiwen would probably give him about as much trouble as a cool drink of water.

However, since Yan Wushi had instructed him to do so, Yu Shengyan still brought Shen Qiao along with him. While Shen Qiao waited outside the Yan residence, Yu Shengyan leapt straight onto the roof, then soundlessly groped his way towards Yan Zhiwen's study.

According to his information, Yan Zhiwen was quite cunning, despite being a second-rate martial artist. That was why he'd been able to land a place in Hehuan Sect. Yu Shengyan was only killing him to frighten their enemies, though, so he hadn't really given the man himself much thought. Only when he entered did he realize that something was wrong.

The Yan residence's servants were still there, and guards still patrolled the perimeter from time to time, but although he searched from the study to the bedroom, Yu Shengyan failed to find any trace of Yan Zhiwen himself.

And it wasn't only Yan Zhiwen. It seemed that even his wives, concubines, and children had all disappeared into thin air.

Wraith-like and wrapped in shadows, Yu Shengyan's movements took after the style of Huanyue Sect—unpredictable and cunning. He alighted inside the inner house, then grabbed a servant and tapped an

acupoint near his throat, rendering him mute. Feeling like he'd fallen into a surreal dream, the man was unable to react in time.

"Where is Yan Zhiwen?"

The servant's eyes widened when he realized how effortlessly this handsome young man could restrain him. He was seized with panic but couldn't speak.

Yu Shengyan smiled thinly at him. "You tell me where Yan Zhiwen and his family have gone, and I won't kill you. Otherwise, even if you call for help, I can kill everyone in this house until not a soul is left. Do you understand?"

The servant was beyond terrified. He nodded convulsively.

Yu Shengyan loosened his grip a little and undid the acupoint.

Quickly, the servant said, "The mistresses and young masters left two days ago. The master said he'd sent them to stay for a while at his spare villa by the springs."

Yu Shengyan sneered. "Even if the women are gone, don't tell me Yan Zhiwen left with them—he still has court tomorrow. Does he not intend to return?"

The servant said, "The master didn't tell us too much when he left, so we don't…don't know…"

He ran out of patience for listening to this stammering and knocked the man unconscious with a palm strike. Then he found the Yan residence's chief steward and pressed him about the Yan family's whereabouts, but he received the exact same answer.

Yu Shengyan wasn't stupid. By this point he'd realized that Yan Zhiwen had probably been warned that someone was coming to kill him.

But Yan Wushi himself had ordered the assassination. Apart from him, only Shen Qiao knew about it—even the Xie residence's chief steward had no idea.

Yu Shengyan certainly couldn't have gone around yelling about the plan and leaking the news himself.

Icy killing intent surged through his heart. At first, he wanted to crush the chief steward's throat right there, but then he gave it a second thought. Now that he couldn't kill the entire Yan family, killing one subordinate was meaningless. It might even put the enemy on higher alert and draw Hehuan Sect's ridicule. Thus, he knocked the man unconscious, then turned and left the residence. Steaming with anger, he went and found Shen Qiao, who was still waiting for him in a nearby alley.

"Did you tip off Yan Zhiwen?"

Shen Qiao nodded, showing not the slightest hesitation or denial. "Indeed."

Enraged at how he'd ruined things, Yu Shengyan's usual careless smile was nowhere to be seen. Instead, his expression was cold and murderous. "Why?"

"I know that there is a rift between our sect and Hehuan Sect. Yan Zhiwen is a member of Hehuan Sect, so Shizun wishes to kill him. It's not my place to comment on that. But are the children guilty? If he wants to kill Yan Zhiwen, why bring his spouses and children into it?"

Coldly, Yu Shengyan said, "It's *not your place* to say whether his spouses and children should die. But what I really wish to know is how exactly you managed to deliver the message to Yan Zhiwen. You're blind, feeble, and can't even tell north from south."

"You've said before that Yan Zhiwen is a cunning man," said Shen Qiao. "If there's a single detail out of place, it will arouse his suspicions. My prescription contains a portion of danggui.[19] I managed to hide some of it and was looking for the chance to send it to the Yan residence. But then, I happened to meet Han Eying outside the pharmacy that day. Using the excuse of a return gift, I put what I'd intended to give Yan Zhiwen inside a box and requested she pass it on to him. She assumed we were acquainted and asked no further questions. I imagine that when Yan Zhiwen received the danggui, he must have sensed that something was wrong, so he moved his family in advance."

Yu Shengyan was so angry he could only laugh. "I truly underestimated you! I never anticipated you'd be so capable!"

He reached out and squeezed Shen Qiao's neck, slowly choking him. "Do you know the consequences of ruining a mission assigned by Shizun, hm?"

Shen Qiao had no strength to fight back. He couldn't breathe, and his complexion grew ugly, his chest heaving rapidly. He managed to spit out a broken, stilted sentence. "The truth is…I'm not a Huanyue Sect disciple, am I?"

Yu Shengyan froze, and his hand went slack.

Shen Qiao immediately grabbed onto the wall for support, coughing.

"How did you figure it out?"

"A feeling," Shen Qiao said calmly. "Although I have no memories, my judgment is still intact. Whether it's Shizun or Shixiong, neither of you treated me like their disciple or martial sibling. The servants who served me at the first villa were very cautious with me too, as if they were afraid of revealing something they shouldn't. I have no martial ability, and I'm completely unable to help on this mission. Even though I'd only drag you down, Shizun still wanted me to come along. Not to mention that even if it was due to my own incompetence, me being injured this badly should have damaged my master's reputation. Yet you never mentioned anything about that. None of it made any sense."

Seeing Yu Shengyan made no move to reply, he continued, "In truth, the method I used wasn't all that clever. It could only fool the Xie residence maids. If you hadn't considered Yan Zhiwen beneath you, and if you'd sent someone to keep an eye on him, he wouldn't have been able to escape even if he'd tried."

"That's right. Yan Zhiwen is insignificant, so I didn't take him seriously. That's why you had the opportunity to step in and take advantage. But do you know the consequences if Shizun learns of this? You saved some people who have nothing to do with you, and they won't even know you helped them escape. If they did know, they might not even be grateful. Was it worth it?"

Shen Qiao shook his head. "When it comes to worth, every heart weighs it differently. Grudges have a source, and debts a debtor, but involving innocent people should never be commended. When you don't

save the people you could have, when you don't take action when you could have, a shadow lodges in your heart forever. Whether other people know about it—whether they'll feel grateful—that's their business."

Yu Shengyan had never seen Shen Qiao as he'd been before his fall, and he didn't know what he'd been like before his injuries. From the moment Shen Qiao had woken up, he'd been feeble and sickly, and spent nine out of ten days in bed. Other than his good looks, there was nothing remarkable about him. Although Yu Shengyan had never made any vicious comments, deep down he'd also looked down on Shen Qiao, thinking that only someone hopelessly incompetent could fall from a perfectly fine sect leader into such a dreadful state.

But at this moment, as he leaned against the wall, Shen Qiao's face was as tranquil as a clear day, devoid of fear or panic. There, faintly visible, was the aura of someone who'd once been a grandmaster of his generation.

Yu Shengyan sneered. "You can't even take care of yourself, but you've got the time to care if other people live or die? If you're so chock-full of kindness, why not think about the day you lost all your martial arts and were left at the bottom of a cliff? We were the ones who saved you. If not for us, you would be a corpse in the wilderness by now, and this is how you repay us?"

Shen Qiao sighed. "The kindness of saving a life should be repaid in abundance, but the two situations are unrelated."

Yu Shengyan frowned.

He'd thought this would be a simple assignment, but he couldn't have guessed that Shen Qiao, amnesiac that he was, would act so unexpectedly. He'd even managed to pass information to Yan Zhiwen right beneath Yu Shengyan's nose. When this news got back to Shizun, he would definitely be deemed incompetent, unable to handle even a minor task such as this.

Shen Qiao was special, so Yu Shengyan couldn't kill him. He'd probably just have to bring him back for Shizun to deal with.

Shen Qiao seemed to sense his mood and actually tried to reassure him. "Don't worry, I will explain what happened to the Sect Leader. You won't be implicated."

Yu Shengyan was sulky. "*You're* the one who should be worried!"

Shen Qiao smiled. Abruptly, he asked, “Yu-shixiong, since I’m not a member of Huanyue Sect, may I ask if ‘Shen Qiao’ is my real name?”

Yu Shengyan was silent for a moment. “It’s real.”

“Then, who was I before I was injured? Do I have any family who are still alive?”

“When you get back, you should ask Shizun yourself.”

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But they didn’t get to see Yan Wushi when they returned.

Shortly after they’d departed for Yecheng, Yan Wushi had also left the villa. They were told he was headed to Zhou.

“Then, before Shizun left, did he leave behind any instructions?” Yu Shengyan asked the villa’s steward.

“The master wants you to head to Banbu Peak for your training,” said the steward. “As for Shen-gongzi,[20] the master said that if everything went well, then he should remain in the villa to recuperate. But, if Shen-gongzi disrupted your plans in Yecheng and gave you trouble, then he must leave here by himself and is forbidden from taking anything with him.”

Yu Shengyan was a bit taken aback. “Did Shizun really say that?”

The steward gave him a strained smile. “Where would this lowly one find the gall to lie?”

Yu Shengyan had just been worrying about how he was going to explain himself upon their return. Who could have expected such a flippant conclusion?

He pondered for a moment, then called for Shen Qiao and told him about the message Yan Wushi had left for them.

Shen Qiao took it quite calmly. “After all, I did give you trouble, and I prevented you from completing the task the Sect Leader gave you. It’s incredibly lenient of him to handle things this way.”

Yu Shengyan understood a thing or two about his master. The way he saw it, Yan Wushi was definitely not being lenient—he probably had some other calculations going on.

Shen Qiao was blind, and the world was in chaos. Anything could happen to him out there. If he got abducted, and then people found out that the imposing sect leader of Xuandu Mountain had been reduced to an abductee, Xuandu Mountain's dignity would be in tatters. They wouldn't even have the face to remain in the jianghu.

Yu Shengyan might not have been as capricious and unrestrained as his master, but he still wasn't about to go against his master's wishes for Shen Qiao's sake.

"In that case, you should leave tomorrow. Northeast from here is Yecheng, and southeast is Southern Chen. If you wish to go to Jiankang, you should head southeast, but the journey will be longer. You've already been to Yecheng. It's prosperous, but chaotic, and the road there will also be full of vagrants. If you wish to live a peaceful life, going to Southern Chen is better."

Shen Qiao nodded and clasped his hands in thanks. "Thank you for telling me, Yu-xiong.[21] I have one request: I wish for Yu-xiong to tell me who I am and where I'm from. That way, I'll have somewhere to go."

Yu Shengyan was indifferent. "All things considered, there's no harm in telling you now. You used to be the sect leader of Xuandu's Violet Palace, on Xuandu Mountain. During a fight with the Göktürks' number one martial artist, Kunye, you fell from the mountain cliff. Shizun rescued you. However, I'd advise against rushing back there to look for kin. I haven't heard a word about anyone from Xuandu Mountain searching for you since the incident."

"Xuandu Mountain…" Shen Qiao frowned, then muttered the name again, and a bewildered expression came over his face.

Yu Shengyan sneered. "Our Huanyue Sect may be demonic in the eyes of the world, but at least we're open and honest villains. We kill when we say we will, and we're never afraid to speak our minds. Unlike certain righteous sects, who say one thing and do the opposite! Of course, it's up to

you whether you take my word for it. If you end up dead, don't say I didn't warn you beforehand!"

Shen Qiao was silent.

Early the next morning, the villa's servants woke him up and politely dismissed him from the building.

He had nothing to call his own except a green bamboo cane. Forget copper coins, he didn't even have half a handful of food.

Yu Shengyan was blatantly giving him zero leeway. Just as he'd intended, Shen Qiao was left to fend for himself.

The dawn sun shone warmly down upon him, bringing with it the scent of spring. It wasn't unpleasant at all.

Shen Qiao squinted a bit and raised a hand to shield his eyes.

After gradual progress, he was now able to perceive light, though it only came through in blurred shapes, and his eyes stung and wept after looking too long. It was still better than opening his eyes to see nothing but darkness.

He turned back to look at the villa.

Though Huanyue Sect never had good intentions, it was undeniable that they'd taken him in and given him medical treatment and care. This was a favor that couldn't be erased.

If Shen Qiao met Yan Wushi in person one day, then he'd have to thank him.

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Chapter 6:
Chen Gong

MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED YEARS had passed since the people of Jin had migrated south, and the north was finally finding some stability after weathering the Uprising of the Five Barbarians.

The kingdoms of Qi and Zhou were separated by a border: one lay to the east and the other to the west. The Emperor of Qi, Gao Wei, was erratic and outlandish in his actions, and it was his negligence that had brought about Northern Qi's decline and the spread of vagrants and refugees. Meanwhile, under Emperor Yuwen Yong's rule, Northern Zhou flourished more with every passing day—within its borders, life was stable, and the people were prosperous.

It was a fair distance between Funing County and Zhou, and many refugees also traveled along those roads. If one started on the journey with little preparation, they would soon truly understand what it was like for both heaven and earth to ignore their pleas.

A drought had taken hold in Northern Qi the year before—even when winter came, there'd been very little snow—and so the famine continued into the current year, and refugees could be seen walking the entire distance from Yecheng to the Chen border. Rumor was that in some places, starving people had even begun eating each other's children.[22] Shen Qiao considered his poor eyesight and inability to fight. If he somehow found himself in the company of cannibals, he'd almost certainly end up on the dinner menu.

Funing County was closer to Yecheng in the north, and although they'd had little rain there either, they hadn't suffered any great disaster, so the area was comparatively more stable. The county was also large, and since the temple festival had begun, the town was lively and bustling as many people came and went.

Qi and Zhou were northern countries, and during the north's early years, Xianbei customs had prevailed. But, as time went on, Han influence gradually took hold, and now even their clothes and jewelry mostly embodied Han refinement, with a Xianbei touch. The upper-class nobles

pursued elegance and splendor, wearing long trailing ribbons and tinkling beads of jade. Their aspirations shaped the trends for all folk, so every rich family without exception wore full-length gowns, and there were also hats and flowing skirts in the northern fashions. With such a myriad of styles, the scenery in this Funing County town transformed it into a "little capital" during the temple festival.

The temple festival was being held at the newer Duke Jiang's Temple, where of course the one they worshipped was the Grand Duke Jiang, Jiang Shang.[23] The original Duke Jiang's Temple was located on the south side of town. It was said to have been built during the Han Dynasty, but later damaged by war and then abandoned completely. Now only a dilapidated shell was left, and even the statue of Duke Jiang had gone missing. And so, the empty, ramshackle temple became a shelter for beggars and paupers.

Recently, a new resident had moved in, and he was named Chen Gong.

During the day, he worked at the town's granary as a seasonal laborer, loading and unloading rice from carts, doing only heavy work. As his pay was meager, he couldn't bear to spend it on rent, so when night fell, he returned to the broken-down temple. He was quite content with this arrangement, but there were two beggars living at the temple too, so he couldn't make it his permanent residence. He had to keep his money on him at all times, and even needed to watch his food to keep them from pilfering it when he wasn't paying attention.

When he returned on this particular evening, he immediately noticed that there was an extra person in the broken-down temple.

A man in a grayish-white robe was sitting there.

The first thing Chen Gong did was frown involuntarily. The temple wasn't roomy to begin with. Adding another person was like snatching away another piece of his territory.

Then he noticed that the other man was holding a paper packet in his hand and slowly eating from it, bite by bite, with his head lowered. The aroma fanned out from that paper packet.

It was the aroma of a donkey-meat sandwich. He recognized the smell immediately. Chen Gong had eaten one a couple of times, when his father was still alive. But after his father's death, his stepmother had teamed up with her own children and chased him out of the house. He earned so few coppers from hauling rice every day that he yearned to break them into more coins to use. Where would the chance to taste a donkey-meat sandwich even come from?

The aroma stirred up his long-forgotten memories. Chen Gong couldn't help but gulp down a mouthful of saliva.

With a second look, he noticed that next to the man was another bulging paper packet.

That meant that there was still another donkey-meat sandwich.

It wasn't only Chen Gong who'd noticed, the other two beggars had too, and one of them was already yelling. "Hey, if you wanna stay here, you gotta ask us first! This temple is small and it can't hold that many people. Hurry up, get on out of here!"

Chen Gong knew that they were deliberately picking a fight. He made no sound, just walked up to the spot where he usually stayed and sat down, gathering up some straw. He kept his ears pricked, and he kept that donkey-meat sandwich fixed in his sight, out of the corner of his eye.

"I have nowhere else to go either," said the gray-robed man in a gentle voice. "I saw that there was still room here, so I wanted to come in and rest for a while. If this brother is willing to accommodate me, then I will be deeply grateful."

The beggar said, "If you wanna stay and rest, fine by me. Just hand over everything you've got on you!"

Chen Gong sneered with mild disdain. "I don't want your things. As long as you pay me with food, I'm willing to fend off those two for you!"

The beggar said angrily, "Chen-dalang,[24] we weren't even talking to you, so why are you running your mouth?!"

Chen Gong was only sixteen, not very old at all. He wasn't tall or strong, but his youth lent him flexibility and great endurance, and he was ruthless to the bone. If it wasn't for that, he wouldn't have been able to lay

stake to the largest patch of territory when he'd moved into the temple after the beggars.

"What, so you're allowed to talk, but not me?" Chen Gong said lazily.

They were beggars, yes, but in this town all the beggars banded together and shared information. Since there were two of them, they figured they needn't be afraid of Chen Gong.

The beggar didn't pay Chen Gong any further heed—instead, he got up and grabbed for the donkey-meat sandwich from next to the man in gray. "Cut the crap, hand over everything you've got! You wanna enter these here temple gates? Well, I'm your Grandpa Lai, and I call the shots!"

But before his hand could touch the food, someone grabbed his wrist. The beggar was furious. "Chen-dalang, why don't you mind your own business?! You even got an issue with me eating something?!"

With his other hand, Chen Gong snatched up the donkey-meat sandwich. "I want to eat too. Why didn't you ask me?!"

As he spoke, he unwrapped the packet and took a bite. "I've already had some, you want the rest?" he asked gleefully.

The beggar threw himself at Chen Gong, trying to hit him. Chen Gong quickly stuffed the packet into his lapel, then the two of them fell into a heap, brawling. The other beggar who'd stood off to the side joined in as well, and the fight grew from two people to three. Compared to the other two, Chen Gong wasn't as strong, nor was he as tall. But the secret to his victories was that he fought without any regard for his own life—he was unflinchingly vicious.

After kicking one of the beggars hard in the stomach, Chen Gong dusted off his hands. With his hands on his hips, he spat, "I've put up with you guys for long enough! You were always messing with me, just because you were here first. You even spat in my food in secret when I first got here, don't think I didn't see! You still wanna fight? Bring it on! I've got nothing anyway—I've got nothing to lose but my life! If you've got the guts, then bring it!"

It was exactly this viciousness of his that terrified the beggar. Hearing Chen Gong's challenge, he looked down at his partner who still lay flat on

the ground, unable to get up. He chickened out immediately. Clutching at his middle, he turned and ran.

When his partner saw him go, he didn't dare keep fighting either. He crawled to his feet, still holding his stomach and making noises of pain, then snarled, "Just wait, you little brat!" With those last words, he hobbled out of the temple.

Chen Gong fished the half-eaten donkey-meat sandwich out from his lapel and took another bite. Satisfied, he said, "Not bad. Did you buy it from the Li family in the south of town? The meat is chewy, and it's still hot! It's gonna burn my throat!"

He felt like the brawl was worth it, just for this bite of donkey meat. He'd been thinking those two were eyesores for a while now anyway, and after seizing this opportunity, he'd have the place all to himself in the future. That was great.

When the man in gray made no reply, he added, "Hey, I'm asking you a question. What, you mute?"

The other man looked up. "You chased them off. Aren't you afraid they'll come back for revenge?"

Only then did Chen Gong realize that something seemed wrong with the man's eyes. His gaze was dull, and even though he was looking in Chen Gong's direction, he didn't seem to be looking *at* him.

Once Chen Gong took in the bamboo cane at the man's side, he understood: this wasn't a mute, but a blind man.

He clicked his tongue in disdain. "Afraid? I've never been afraid! What can those losers do?"

Chen Gong looked the man in gray up and down. He was dressed in coarse clothes from head to toe, and neither the style nor material was anything special. The only noteworthy thing was his face.

Bluntly speaking, he didn't look much like another homeless person, like Chen Gong, but more like a wandering scholar.

"What's your name?" Chen Gong asked. "You don't look like someone who's in trouble. What are you doing in a place like this? Even rats don't want to nest here!"

The man in gray nodded in his direction and smiled. “My name is Shen Qiao. I fell ill and was without any money. This was the only place I could find to stay for a few days. Once I’ve earned a little money for the journey, I’ll return home. Thank you for helping me drive away the other two. How should I address you?”

There had been both truth and lies in Yu Shengyan’s words, so he wasn’t completely trustworthy, but in the end, Shen Qiao had no place to go other than Xuandu Mountain. After giving it some thought, he finally decided to head there first.

Xuandu Mountain was located on the border between Northern Zhou and Southern Chen. There were two ways to get there. The first was to travel southwards all the way from Funing County until one crossed into Chen, and then bear northeast, which was a rather indirect route. The other way was to head directly south from this place, which was a comparatively shorter journey and somewhat more convenient.

Shen Qiao chose the latter way.

Even though the world around it was in chaos, Funing County had been spared from disaster and was still peaceful and prosperous—a singular piece of pure land in the turbulent world. And what Shen Qiao said was true: he was penniless, and this was the best place to rectify that situation.

His eyesight was recovering very slowly, but he’d definitely made some progress. In the daytime, with enough light, he could see some vague and blurry outlines. This was much better than when he’d just woken up and couldn’t even see his hand when he held it before his face.

Chen Gong sat down. “Anything’s fine. My name is Chen Gong, so you can just call me Chen-dalang. I ate one of your donkey-meat sandwiches earlier, so let’s say that’s your rent for today. But I also helped you chase off those two guys. When we add that on to the cost of tomorrow’s stay, you’re gonna have to pay me three donkey-meat sandwiches tomorrow!”

Shen Qiao smiled. “Very well.”

When he saw him agree so readily, Chen Gong became suspicious. “What are you gonna buy donkey-meat sandwiches with? Didn’t you say had no money?”

"Then I'll simply earn more!"

"You? I've heard of scholars being bookkeepers and accountants, but you can't even see!" Chen Gong said, full of ridicule. "How can you do bookkeeping? Don't tell me you're gonna haul rice too? I'm telling you, three donkey-meat sandwiches, not one less! Don't think you can weasel out of it. You can ask around about me—I, Chen-dalang, might have nothing else, but even ghouls are scared of fighting me! Didn't you see those two losers just now? If you can't bring me three sandwiches tomorrow, you can sleep outside and eat air for dinner!"

Shen Qiao was good-natured; he didn't get angry when Chen Gong used such a tone with him. He even smiled and agreed.

Although the ramshackle temple was very broken-down, leaking from all sides and without even an undamaged window, its redeeming feature was that there were many pillars supporting the altars, which could be used to shelter from the wind. Chen Gong had also brought in some straw stacks and firewood. He used the straw as a blanket to keep out the drafts and burned the wood for warmth. Of course, these had only been for himself. But now that Shen Qiao was willing to bring "offerings" to the temple, Chen Gong reluctantly shared some straw and wood with him.

Then he saw that Shen Qiao was actually well prepared: inside his bag was a thick, old garment that he used as a blanket. At this, Chen Gong couldn't help but give a cold snort.

The two beggars didn't return; they'd probably found some new shelter. Chen Gong brazenly claimed the clothes they'd used as blankets for himself, but when he caught a whiff of the sour odor on them, he curled his lips and threw them away, then moved himself closer to the fire.

His original plan was to snatch Shen Qiao's garment for himself as well, but on second thought, he could just wait to strike until the other man ran out of "offerings".

With this thought in mind, he inadvertently fell right to sleep.

Early the next morning, Chen Gong got up and prepared to go to work at the granary, as usual.

He looked around: Shen Qiao had vanished, leaving only a pile of straw that still held his imprint and a heap of dark ash—what was left of his

firewood.

Chen Gong didn't think much of it and headed off to the granary. He didn't believe for a moment that Shen Qiao would really return with three sandwiches that day. After all, if the guy had any money to spare, he wouldn't need to stay in a broken-down temple that even ghosts steered clear of. Not to mention that he was both feeble *and* blind, so what was he gonna do to earn money?

Don't you dare return empty-handed! I'll beat you up so badly even your mother won't recognize you!

That evening, Chen Gong walked towards the broken-down temple, all while silently mulling this over.

Before he'd even stepped through the door, he smelled a familiar aroma.

The sound of his footsteps seemed to draw Shen Qiao's attention—the man raised his head and smiled in Chen Gong's direction. "You've returned."

"Donkey meat…" Chen Gong only got out those two words, a stern look on his face, when he stopped short.

For then he saw three paper packets stuffed with donkey-meat sandwiches, neatly placed upon the straw where he slept.

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Chapter 7:
The Weakling Who Wasn't Weak

FOR A MOMENT, Chen Gong froze. Then he said, "Did you bring these?"

Shen Qiao nodded. "Didn't you ask me to return with three donkey-meat sandwiches?"

Chen Gong noticed then that Shen Qiao had changed into a new green robe. The gray robe he'd worn before was beneath him, being used as bedding. And the person himself was still as clean and tidy as ever—perhaps he'd managed to find somewhere to take a bath.

"Where did you get the money for them?" Chen Gong was suspicious.

Shen Qiao smiled. "I did it the ethical way, of course. Look at me, do I look like I could steal anything?"

Chen Gong harumphed. "Who knows!"

That said, he still picked up a sandwich. It was warm and soft to the touch—clearly fresh off the stove. He opened the paper packet and took a bite. The sandwich was baked golden-brown, and when he bit into the crust, juices gushed out and a smoky, rich aroma filled the air.

Chen Gong's gluttony flared up, and he ate two in one go. He couldn't bear to eat the final one though, and after thinking about it, decided to leave it for tomorrow's breakfast. He could have it right before going to work.

He turned his head to look at Shen Qiao, who was still sitting there cross-legged, with his bamboo cane in his arms. His eyes were gently closed, and Chen Gong couldn't tell if he was resting or thinking.

"Hey," he said. "Where are you from?"

Shen Qiao shook his head. "I don't know. I fell while on the road and knocked my head, so I forgot many things."

“If you don’t want to say, then just don’t! What kind of excuse is that? You think I’m a real sucker, do you?” Displeased, Chen Gong lost all interest in chatting and lay right down.

But then—perhaps because he’d overstuffed himself—no matter how he tossed and turned he couldn’t fall asleep. So Chen Gong had nothing else to do but try talking again: “Hey, what exactly were you doing all day? How’d you earn that money?”

A soft voice came from the other side of the temple. “Reading palms and telling fortunes.”

“You know how to read fortunes?” Chen Gong sat up and faced him.

Shen Qiao was still sitting in place, cross-legged. “Honestly, it doesn’t involve much reading,” he said with a smile. “But a person’s palm will always give away small traces of whether they are poor or rich. It’s just a trifling skill to earn a little money.”

Chen Gong perked up. “Then can you see if riches and glory are in my fate as well?”

“Let me feel your hand.”

Chen Gong extended his hands to him, and Shen Qiao stroked them for a moment. “You’re used to carrying heavy loads on a daily basis, so you must be working seasonally at a granary or at the docks, correct?”

“What else?” Chen Gong was not stupid. He knew Shen Qiao must have drawn his conclusion from the thick calluses that covered his hands.

“You’re stubborn, tough, and defiant in disposition, as well as a bit distrustful. You must have fallen out with your family when you were small, and you probably had a stepmother or a stepfather.”

Chen Gong couldn’t help but stare, wide-eyed. “What else?”

Shen Qiao smiled. “With the world in turmoil these days, there is one thing you can do. With your character, if you join the army, there’s a chance you’ll be able to really make something of yourself.”

“How’d you manage to see all this?”

“Your accent is local, so you couldn’t possibly be a refugee from afar. But local citizens usually have a house, unless something went wrong with

their family. Given your personality, chances are it's like I said, that you fell out with yours. But, even if you had fallen out, if your father and mother were around, they wouldn't have just sat back when you ended up outside in the rain and wind. So, either your father must have married a severe stepmother, or both your parents passed early."

He laid out his reasoning, step by step, and Chen Gong was finally, mostly, convinced.

"Well, then how do you know I'll be successful if I join the army?"

"You don't want to live beneath your stepmother's temper, so you left home in such a fury you would rather stay out here. And last night, you fought those beggars over donkey-meat sandwiches. Therefore, I can tell that you're a person who's ruthless to both yourself and to others. If that's the case, you'd be well suited to a military environment."

Chen Gong snorted coldly. "So, basically, you just look down on people like me who can't manage a full meal and needs to steal your stuff. All this beating around the bush, but it turns out you're just making fun of me!"

Shen Qiao smiled. "Who am I to look down on you when I'm in such a sorry state myself? Didn't you just ask me to demonstrate how I read palms and tell fortunes? I only used you as an example, to explain. And I was quite correct, wasn't I? I can't make a lot of money this way, but it's still enough for a meal."

"If you're such a smooth-talker, acting like you know everything, how come you're still so down and out? Did you get robbed by bandits on the road?"

"Possibly. I don't remember myself—sometimes my mind is clear, sometimes it isn't. Many things are fuzzy and vague. Luckily, you were willing to let me stay here, otherwise I really don't know where I would have spent the last two nights. I should owe you my thanks!"

Having been duly praised, Chen Gong became much more at ease. He even felt like it was right and proper for Shen Qiao to give him those three donkey-meat sandwiches, as if Chen Gong really had personally protected him.

“So? It’s still three sandwiches tomorrow. Don’t think that you can worm your way out of it by talking my ear off!”

“All right.”

The next evening, when Chen Gong returned to the ramshackle temple, there were three donkey-meat sandwiches placed upon his spot once again, just like the night before. On the other side of the room, Shen Qiao held another in his hand and was eating away, slow and methodical, as if it weren’t a donkey-meat sandwich but some kind of exotic, high-class delicacy.

What a poser! Chen Gong snorted again, then turned his head and opened the paper wrapper before taking a vicious bite.

And when Chen Gong returned the evening after that, three more donkey-meat sandwiches were there again, just like before. He didn’t bother with courtesies, just picked one up and ate it straight away. Even though Shen Qiao was mild-tempered and quick to respond to his questions, Chen Gong always felt that they were too different from each other, and words never made things better. He had difficulty understanding the things Shen Qiao said, and Shen Qiao seemed immune to Chen Gong’s attempts to be fierce and intimidating. It was like landing a punch in cotton. Even though he clearly held the upper hand, he was the one who ended up stifled.

His intuition told him that Shen Qiao was someone remarkable. Not just because of the unfailingly pristine clothes, which lent him a scholar’s refined frailty, but also because there was the sense of something indescribable and unfathomable about him. Even though they were both sheltering in the same ramshackle temple, Chen Gong still felt like he was one level beneath the guy.

Chen Gong didn’t like that feeling, so he didn’t like Shen Qiao either.

Wind leaked in through all the temple walls, so the nights were freezing. There were probably far more rats than humans in residence. His shoes were torn, and it felt like something was nibbling at his toes. Chen Gong yelped in pain, but was loath to get up and seek revenge on a rat, so he simply curled up tighter instead.

Amid the howling wind, it seemed the sound of footsteps drew near from outside.

But who'd come to this shithole in the midst of such hellish wind?

Chen Gong was about to doze off when he heard Shen Qiao say, "Someone's coming in."

He opened his eyes and saw several skulking silhouettes slip inside, bludgeons held in their hands. The two in front seemed terribly familiar—with a proper look, he recognized them as the two beggars he'd driven away the other night.

Chen Gong jolted up, awake in an instant. He quickly got to his feet. "The hell are you doing?!"

One of them laughed and said, "Chen-dalang, Chen-dalang, weren't you full of bravado just the other day? You even drove us outta here! But we've called on our brothers from the town's beggar guild today. Let's see you cop an attitude now!"

Chen Gong spat at them. "What beggar guild, you're just a bunch of beggars fooling around. How is that a guild?!"

"Still talking smack when your end is near!" The other man replied angrily. "Don't go pleading for mercy later. Brothers, this is the bastard who stole our territory! Oh, there's also a new guy. He's got money on him—we'll take them both down. With all the stuff we get off them, we'll buy a round of drinks!"

Anyone could tell at a glance that Chen Gong was destitute. Even if he did have money on him, at most it would buy a few buns. But this other man was different. His clothes were clean and tidy; even if all they did was yank those robes off, surely they could sell them for a couple dozen copper coins?

Five or six figures lunged at Chen Gong all at once. Despite his power and ruthlessness, in the end he was only a teenage boy, and he was nowhere near solid or sturdy. The other side's strength and overwhelming numbers had him down and beat in just a few moments with a mass of vicious blows to his face and body. They weren't after his life, but they weren't holding back either. The corner of Chen Gong's mouth was split open. All he could do was try to shield his vital areas from getting kicked.

The beggars searched Chen Gong over, but their final haul was only thirty copper coins. One of them spat and said, "What bad luck, we got

ourselves a bum! Lai Da, didn't you say he had at least fifty coppers?"

Lai Da smiled apologetically. "Maybe he's spent it all. Anyway, there's still another one over there!"

The crowd turned their attention to Shen Qiao and saw that he'd been sitting quietly the entire time, as if he'd been scared stupid. He held the bamboo cane tucked in his arms, and remained unmoving.

One man wondered, "Why's it look like there's something wrong with his eyes? He blind?"

Confident in their greater numbers, Lai Da yelled, "Hey, hand over all the money you got and us grandpas will spare you a beating! You hear me?"

Shen Qiao shook his head. "I worked hard to earn the money I have, so I can't give it to you."

Lai Da sneered. "Oh-ho? Quite the spine you've got. That's fine then, hold on to it. Two days ago, you wouldn't even give up a single donkey-meat sandwich. Today, us grandpas want you bloody and penniless!"

Several people lunged at him, intent on doing to Shen Qiao exactly what they'd done to Chen Gong.

They'd underestimated this frail and feeble scholar from the start.

Lai Da moved the fastest: one fist was already hurtling towards Shen Qiao's face, his other hand moving to grab his lapel.

Judging from their positions, the fist should have hit its target, forcing the other man to topple over backwards, giving Lai Da the perfect chance to pounce atop him.

But suddenly, pain speared through his wrist.

A yelp escaped Lai Da. Before he understood what was going on, something else struck him in the waist, forcing him to fall to the side and knocking over his nearby companion. The two of them landed in a heap.

There was no candlelight within the broken-down temple, and it was a windy night that kept the moon half hidden as clouds scudded past overhead.

No one had gotten a clear view of why exactly Lai Da fell, so none of them stopped coming—they lunged at Shen Qiao.

But then came the sound of several thwacks, and a couple more people dropped to the ground.

"What kind of sorcery are you using?" Lai Da was undeterred. While he yelled, he heaved himself upright and lunged at his opponent again.

Shen Qiao's vision had been slow to recover. At night, when the light was dim, he could only see a blurred mass of shadows. The moment his attention slipped, Lai Da pushed him down and punched him square in the chest, forcing him to suck in a painful gasp of cold air.

After his successful strike, Lai Da moved to grab Shen Qiao's cane from his hands. But then a point on his waist went numb, and the cane came thrusting towards him. It wasn't particularly fast, yet as Lai Da reached for the cane, he failed to grasp it and instead was jabbed viciously in the nose. He screamed in pain. Unable to think about anything else, he clutched at his nose and fell to the side, blood trickling out between his fingers.

This development took everyone by surprise. Chen Gong was completely frozen, watching as Shen Qiao struck here and there with his bamboo cane. Though there seemed no rhyme or reason to his strikes, the beggars couldn't get anywhere near him. Instead, they were promptly sent sprawling all over the place, wailing as they landed on the ground.

"I'm going easy on you now," said Shen Qiao. "And yet you still won't leave? Do you want me to stab out your eyes and turn you blind, like me?"

His voice was soft, unnerving, mingling with the wind like a ghost.

Of course, Lai Da and friends dared not stay. Straight away, they scrambled to their feet and fled. This time, they didn't even bother with some parting trash talk, just beat an immediate retreat as if they might wet their pants in terror.

"You should have just stabbed them blind!" Chen Gong said hatefully. "What's the point of holding back with people like that?"

Shen Qiao leaned on his bamboo cane and didn't reply. The rise and fall of his shoulders was noticeable, as if he was panting slightly.

Only then did Chen Gong come around and realize, if Shen Qiao could beat off all those beggars, then taking on Chen Gong himself would be a snap. Plus, he'd yelled and squawked at Shen Qiao before. Luckily for him, Shen Qiao hadn't taken offense, otherwise…

A little frightened, his tone turned polite. "Hey, uh, Shen Qiao? Shen-langjun? Shen-qianbei?[25]"

Just as Chen Gong spoke, the other man suddenly slid down the pillar behind him and fell limply to the ground.

Chen Gong could only stare.

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Chapter 8:
Journeying Together

WHEN SHEN QIAO came to, he saw old beams slatted above his head, decayed with age, looking almost in danger of crashing down at any moment.

Someone at his side was shaking his shoulder.

At first, he didn't realize where he was and absently muttered, "Shidi, don't fuss."

"Who you calling your Shidi?" Chen Gong was in a bad mood. "You slept for two days and two nights! I used all the money I had on me and it still wasn't enough, so I took yours for now, but that's only enough for three days. If we can't pay tomorrow, we'll be kicked out back to the broken-down temple!"

"Oh," said Shen Qiao. He stared blankly at the ceiling beams for a long time, his eyes vacant. Chen Gong had no idea what he was looking at.

Seeing Shen Qiao act like none of this was his problem, Chen Gong got angry. He couldn't help but shove his shoulder again. "Say something, don't just stare! We're at an inn now. I was afraid that they'd come back looking for revenge, so I moved you out of the temple and even hired you a doctor! The doctor said something about your stagnant qi or whatever, some kind of cold qi inside you. Anyway, it's *something* bad, and he prescribed you a *lot* of medicine, so we've used up *all* the money!"

Shen Qiao came back to himself. "Tell him not to prescribe any medicine. Even if I take it, it's useless. I know my body best; this isn't something that can be rushed."

"What's the use of saying that now?! I've already bought the medicine. You telling me to try and return it?"

"Oh," said Shen Qiao. "In that case, never mind."

Chen Gong half-squatted so that their eyes were level. "Hey, since you're so skilled, why don't we work as street performers. Or maybe we

should just join the Liuhe Guild? They've got a branch in this county—with your martial prowess, you can definitely land a good position. And then, you can bring me in…"

"What is the Liuhe Guild?" asked Shen Qiao.

In the face of his blank and guileless expression, Chen Gong was forced to explain, although impatiently. "It's a guild that does business by both land and sea. On land they mainly perform escort missions. I've also heard that they do some spy work for hire or something like that. In any case… Anyway, it's just a really big guild! I only found out about it when I heard someone mention it. So, how about it? Let's join the Liuhe Guild! If we can find a good job, then you won't have to tell fortunes all day, and I won't have to haul rice either!"

By the end of this speech, he was brimming with excitement.

Shen Qiao shook his head. "I've told you before that there are many things I don't remember. Those moves last night only came to me in a flash of inspiration. Memory aside, what kind of job could I get there with my poor eyesight? It's better if I just keep on earning money here, peacefully."

The words were like a basin of cold water thrown over Chen Gong's head, and they doused even his smile.

Shen Qiao couldn't see it, but he could feel the youth's dejection. "You're still young. You shouldn't fantasize about being an overnight success—we're not people of the jianghu. Wouldn't we be out of our depth if we joined a jianghu guild all of a sudden when we don't know any of the rules?"

Chen Gong was extremely unhappy. "I don't know what out of our depth means. I just know that the money I earn from hauling rice every day isn't even enough for us to rent a room at an inn. I know that medicine and food both cost money. You might be all noble and whatever, but does money fall outta the sky? It's not like I'm a thief or robber, so don't talk like I only stand around all day dreaming that money will land on my head… Hey, what's wrong? Don't scare me! All I did was complain about you a little!"

Shen Qiao clutched his head, waiting for the burst of pain to pass. Slowly, he said, "I won't join the Liuhe Guild. I'm going to Xuandu

Mountain."

"Xuandu Mountain?" Chen Gong said curiously. "What kind of place is that?"

He'd grown up in Funing County, lived there his whole life, and had never gone to school, so his knowledge was limited. He'd only heard about the Liuhe Guild because they had a branch in the county. He'd heard little of anything else.

To him, the world of the jianghu was a far distant thing.

Shen Qiao shook his head without answering, then lapsed back into a daze.

"Hey, say something, you!" Chen Gong snarled. "I used my own money to get you treatment and medicine! You'd better pay me back!"

"For the next few days, I'll set up a fortune-telling stall, as before. Soon, I'll be able to pay you back."

Chen Gong could see that Shen Qiao was completely uninterested in joining the Liuhe Guild and couldn't help but feel demoralized. If Shen Qiao didn't go, then who would give him a second glance when all he had to offer was the strength to haul rice?

"What kind of place is Xuandu Mountain?" he asked.

"A mountain."

Chen Gong let the non-answer hang.

He thought Shen Qiao might irritate him to death. "Bullshit," he said. "Of course I know it's a mountain! I'm *asking* what you're gonna *do* there!"

"I don't know either," said Shen Qiao. "But someone told me that I came from there, so I want to go back and see it."

"Where is this mountain?"

"Near the border of Qi, Zhou, and Chen."

Chen Gong was shocked. "That far away? Then how did you get from there to here?"

Helplessly, Shen Qiao said, "Haven't I already said? I've forgotten many things and still can't remember. If I knew the answer, why would I

talk about returning there to investigate?"

Chen Gong thought for a moment. "How about this: I'll go with you, and you won't need to pay me back either. All you gotta do is teach me a move or two, like what you did, so I can beat six or seven guys into the ground. Then, when we reach Chen, I'll join the Liuhe Guild and you'll head to your Xuandu Mountain. How about that?"

"Funing County is your home," said Shen Qiao. "It's a peaceful place, nearly untouched by warfare, and it's very different from the outside world. Once I leave, I'll need to go straight west, and the closer it is to the Qi-Zhou border, the more chaos there will be. I have no choice, but why would you undertake such a dangerous journey?"

"My father and mother are dead, and my stepsiblings have taken over my house. I'd rather forge my own path out there than stay in Funing County hauling rice. Didn't you say I'm suited to joining the army? To join one, I'll need to go where wars are frequent and soldiers are in demand, right? I don't want to huddle like this my whole life, with even beggars bullying me and looking down on me!"

Shen Qiao was silent for a moment. "Very well, then…"

He'd barely said anything when Chen Gong fell to his knees before his bed with a thump. "Praise be to Shifu, please accept this disciple's respects!"

Shen Qiao's mouth twitched. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Get up, I can't accept disciples and I won't. As for the moves I have now, I might not remember them completely. At most, I can only teach you what I recall, and I can't say how effective that will be. You don't need to take me as your master."

When he heard this, Chen Gong sprang up. Brightly, he said, "All right, but you're older than me, so from now on I'll call you Xiongzhang![26] If anyone ever picks on me again, you've gotta help me out!"

Shen Qiao smiled but didn't reply. Instead, he drifted off once more.

Chen Gong watched him in silence for a few moments. When he saw that Shen Qiao wasn't going to rouse himself, all he could do was turn around and leave.

***

Shen Qiao had been gravely injured by his fall from the cliff, with all his bones shattered. He'd been in critical condition, but those injuries had nearly all mended during the three months he spent in the villa with Yu Shengyan.

What had been fundamentally damaged were his internal organs, along with his martial arts. In that one turn of events, he'd almost lost his abilities entirely. Now all that was left were his fuzzy memories and a half-crippled body. Making a full recovery was easier said than done.

If this had happened to someone else, it would be a severe, practically devastating blow. But in spite of that, Chen Gong was the angry one between the two of them.

They didn't return to the temple, but instead negotiated with the innkeeper for a discount and rented the room for a month straight. All month, Shen Qiao told fortunes at Duke Jiang's Temple, and Chen Gong hauled rice at the granary. At night, when he returned from work, Chen Gong learned martial arts from Shen Qiao. His foundations weren't bad and he had some talent, so within a month he'd made decent progress. However, without internal breathing to support his development, in the end it was little better than a castle built on air. His skills would hold up well enough against hoodlums and thugs, but if he encountered a true practitioner, all his moves would be useless.

After that month, Shen Qiao and Chen Gong left Funing County and set off towards the west.

Shen Qiao hadn't seen Yu Shengyan since leaving the villa, nor anyone else from Huanyue Sect. Funing County was very close to the villa where he'd stayed, but every time he went to Duke Jiang's Temple to set up his fortune-telling stall, all he saw and heard about were thoroughly ordinary people, along with the thoroughly lively market life.

The jianghu seemed incomparably distant, so distant that Shen Qiao sometimes felt that he had no need to go to Xuandu Mountain after all, that living his entire life in Funing County might not be so bad.

But now and then a heaviness would settle in his chest. This, together with rainy-day pain that prickled through his freshly mended bones, the faint glimpses of past events that flashed through his mind, and the true qi that flitted infrequently through his limbs and entire body, were all reminders of one thing: the Shen Qiao he was now was not a whole Shen Qiao.

To the west of Funing County lay Huai Province. It was a large province and was heavily defended due to its proximity to Zhou. The provincial governor there was usually appointed by the emperor himself, and from time to time the imperial censors would patrol, frequently putting the area under martial law.

Although the world had been divided for a long time, the various countries put no prohibitions on trade between nations. That is, with the exception of Huai Province's provincial governor, Shen Buyi, who had a peculiar way of doing things. The moment he took office, he ordered the closure of border trade between Qi and Zhou. Any merchants found engaging in trade would be severely punished. Shen Buyi told the emperor that spies from Zhou could easily slip into the trading markets, then leak the details of their border defenses to the enemy. He advised that Qi close the rest of its border trade as well, and though Qi's Emperor Gao Wei didn't adopt this particular suggestion of Shen Buyi's, he still had high praise for his loyalty and issued a decree of commendation.

Shen Buyi was not only excessive when it came to governance, he was also heavy-handed in his flattery of Qi's officials and nobles alike. The emperor's trusted subjects would often put in a good word for him, and it was only on their good graces that he'd soared from a small-time county lieutenant to a provincial governor.

After considering how much they would spend if they entered the city, Shen Qiao and Chen Gong decided to stay overnight at a temple outside it instead. The next day, they'd head directly into the city for supplies. That way, they could be out of the city and on their way by the afternoon.

The temple was called Chuyun Temple. They'd heard it was in use by worshippers, but in truth it didn't look much better than the dilapidated

temple they'd lived at in Funing County. Inside Chuyun Temple were three monks: one old abbot and the two young monks he'd adopted.

It was a simple place, with only two private rooms for sleeping in—one for the old abbot and one for the two young monks. Other than that, it was all communal cots.

Chen Gong was used to living a hard life. Back in that dilapidated temple in Funing County, forget about a cot, he hadn't even had a blanket. To him, these were very cushy accommodations. Meanwhile, Shen Qiao was easy to please, the type to adapt to any circumstances. He certainly wasn't going to raise any objections either.

When they entered the sleeping area, they realized that another group of four young men had arrived before them. They'd even brought two large storage chests into the room.

Chen Gong was always wary of other people, so he could be hostile and didn't easily cozy up to strangers. Shen Qiao's poor eyesight meant that even though he wanted to greet them, he couldn't properly see what they looked like. The four people who made up the other party made no move to approach them either—just subtly looked Chen Gong and Shen Qiao up and down. When they saw there was no qi strengthening their steps, and that their clothes were shabby, the group paid them no further attention.

Soon enough, the two young monks came in carrying their bedding.

The sleeping quarters were already cramped—two extra people made them even more crowded.

Chen Gong was bubbling over with dissatisfaction. He couldn't help but mutter, "Six people's already plenty, and now here's two more!"

One young monk heard and whispered to him, "Benefactor, there's a young lady traveling with those benefactors over there, and it's inconvenient for her to share a room with us. Therefore, our humble selves lent our room to her. Help others, and others will help you."

Since it was a lady, she needed a room to herself. Chen Gong was still unhappy, but there wasn't much he could say. Seeing how the party of four were all carrying swords drained his urge to speak even more. But then he happened to see something out of the corner of his eye and grew excited. While everyone was eating, he took the opportunity to grab Shen Qiao and

whisper, “Did you see? Those people are from the Liuhe Guild! The symbol of the Liuhe Guild is on their clothes and chests, it’s exactly the same as the one in Funing County!”

Shen Qiao smiled a little. “How could I see, with my poor eyesight?”

Chen Gong’s excitement didn’t dim in the slightest. “Say, if I find a chance to talk to them, and they take a liking to me, do you think they’d agree to let me join the Liuhe Guild?”

Shen Qiao knew that Chen Gong’s heart was still set on the Liuhe Guild. Even after such a long journey, he’d never changed his mind.

Slowly, Shen Qiao said, “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

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Chapter 9:
Terror at Midnight

"WHY NOT?" asked Chen Gong.

"I saw how you tried to approach them just now," said Shen Qiao. "And how they paid you no heed. Furthermore, they didn't say a word when both of us were there, so it seems they are either very wary or unwilling to speak with us. Either way, I'm afraid your wish will be in vain."

Chen Gong was upset, but he had to admit that Shen Qiao was right. "Hmph, I knew that those types would look down on someone from the bottom rung like me. One day, I'm gonna be the one stepping on everyone's heads, and then they'll have to kowtow to me!"

Shen Qiao knew that his hang-ups came from his experiences growing up and could never be resolved with just a couple of words, so he held his tongue on more advice.

The food at Chuyun Temple was as simple as the temple itself: a bowl of white congee and a few side dishes. The side dishes had been pickled right there at the temple. The taste was decent enough.

Shen Qiao ate slowly, but Chen Gong went fast. He'd failed to get in good with the Liuhe Guild, so he was in a bad mood. Once he'd hastily shoveled down a few bites, he returned to the sleeping area.

Not long after he left, two of the other party staying at the temple entered to eat.

Though Shen Qiao could see light by now, he was still unable to discern objects clearly, and his eyes would start to hurt when he used them for too long. Most of the time he simply kept them closed and didn't use them unless he had to.

At that moment, he saw four vague figures approaching and then sitting down at another long table. Two of them were wearing dresses—they seemed to be women.

Shen Qiao was well aware of the situation. He knew the Liuhe Guild must be escorting something important on this trip, so all four men didn't eat together at once but left two behind with their cargo to keep watch. And the two women must be the female guests who'd borrowed the young monk's rooms.

Shen Qiao minded his own business. He fumbled through his porridge, and once he was done, he reached over to grab the bamboo cane at his side.

The bamboo cane fell and hit the ground with a sharp crack.

Shen Qiao frowned slightly—his hand hadn't even reached the cane, and it couldn't have fallen for no reason.

"I touched it accidentally," came a woman's soft voice. "Please forgive me, sir." She bent down to pick up the bamboo cane and handed it to Shen Qiao.

"No matter." Shen Qiao took it and nodded in her direction, then prepared to stand up and leave.

But the woman continued, "Our meeting was fated. May I have this gentleman's name?"

"My last name is Shen," said Shen Qiao.

"Is Shen-xiansheng[27] heading into the city?"

"That is correct."

"There are many inns and relay stations there, so why did you choose this ramshackle little temple instead of finding a place to stay inside the city?"

She was obviously trying to pry into Shen Qiao's business. If he were someone else, he'd likely counter with: "You're staying here too, aren't you? What gives you the right to stick your nose in?" But Shen Qiao was a mild-tempered man, and he gave a proper answer.

"We don't have enough money," he said. "Staying inside the city would be even more expensive, so we're waiting until tomorrow morning to enter. That way, we won't need to stay there overnight."

His voice was pleasant, and he had an aura that drew people in. It was difficult to ignore, despite his rough clothes, and it was even more difficult to see him as the same kind of person as Chen Gong.

That the two of them hung out together despite their complete incompatibility, and that they were even traveling companions, inevitably drew suspicion. People came up to them to try and probe for the full story.

Especially since they were ordinary people, wandering around with no martial arts ability whatsoever.

His answer was reasonable, and she couldn't spot any flaws, so she warmly replied, "I was too forward, please forgive me. My last name is Yun. I'm called Yun Fuyi."

Shen Qiao nodded. "Enjoy your meal, Yun-niangzi. This humble Shen will take his leave now."

"Take care, sir."

Shen Qiao slowly felt his way to the door using his bamboo cane.

Yun Fuyi frowned a little as she watched his retreating back but said nothing.

Hu Yu, who was sitting to her side, said, "Deputy Leader, I fear that those two showing up here isn't a coincidence. That kid is no big deal, but this Shen guy—he may look like a blind man, but why would a blind man be wandering about? He might be here for our cargo."

His twin brother Hu Yan rolled his eyes at him. "If you've noticed, do you think the Deputy Leader hasn't?"

"I was testing him just now," said Yun Fuyi. "He has no internal energy, and didn't recognize my name; it doesn't seem like he's pretending either. Regardless, we should be careful tonight. I'd thought that word would travel too freely within the crowded city, so it would be safer to stay outside. But now it seems such precautions were ineffective."

"Just what kind of treasure is in our cargo?" asked Hu Yu. "We've met two sets of robbers already along our journey, each stronger than the last, and there's still a long road south between here and Jiankang. What I'm afraid of is a mishap with the cargo. If that happens, losing the goods

themselves may be a small matter, but staining the Liuhe Guild's reputation is a large one."

Though their company was small in number, they were decidedly the elite of the Liuhe Guild. Considering that they were accompanied by Yun Fuyi, the deputy leader herself, their strength as a group was undeniable.

But even so, they dared not take things lightly.

Yun Fuyi shook her head. "The Guild Leader gave us a strict order to escort this to Jiankang, no matter what. He sent a message earlier, saying he would rush to Luo Province and meet us there. Then we'll continue south together."

When they heard that their leader wasn't far ahead, Hu Yan and Hu Yu's spirits rose, and they started up again guessing exactly what was in those two chests that could warrant such earnest attention from the guild.

The Liuhe Guild's reach stretched far, both north and south of the Yangtze River. They'd transported cargo here and there countless times over the years, and had even escorted treasures from the imperial palace, but they'd never seen the higher-ups take anything this seriously before.

The deputy leader personally escorting something, and the guild leader personally coming to pick it up? That was an unprecedented, earth-shattering first.

Hu Yan and Hu Yu hailed from Longmen Sect, and they belonged to the small number of top martial artists within the jianghu. But they were still young after all—facing two sets of robbers targeting their goods one after the other hadn't dampened their fighting spirits in the least. In fact, it made them all the more eager to keep pushing onward.

Unlike them, Yun Fuyi was privately worried. "In any case," she said, "we should keep on our guard until we meet up with the Guild Leader."

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Night.

Compared to the city, the outskirts were quieter. So quiet, in fact, it made one's flesh crawl a little.

There was little entertainment to be had in the small temple at night, so everyone went to bed early.

Other than Hu Yan and Hu Yu, Shen Qiao and Chen Gong also shared their communal cots with two of the Liuhe Guild's hall masters, and their martial abilities exceeded even the Hu brothers'. Such a formidable battle formation appearing in the jianghu was very noteworthy. Chen Gong understood little about the jianghu, but even he could tell that these people were all very powerful.

He'd tried every means and made every effort to try and get close to them and join the Liuhe Guild. But his hot fervor ran up against a frigid wall—they simply ignored him. They even extended more civility to Shen Qiao than they did Chen Gong.

After several attempts, Chen Gong finally grew discouraged. At times, he was frustrated and indignant. At other times, he felt that he hadn't shown enough sincerity—that tomorrow, he should go and tell them that he only wanted to enter the Liuhe Guild to clean or to do odd jobs, and then maybe they'd accept him at last.

Of course, his racing thoughts kept him from sleep. After tossing and turning a few times, all of a sudden Chen Gong noticed several members of the Liuhe Guild moving about.

Their movements were quick and light. They threw on their clothes and shoes, then vanished in the span of a blink. Curious, Chen Gong wanted to get up too and take a look, but then a hand reached over from beside him and held him down.

Chen Gong jolted in surprise before he realized it was Shen Qiao.

"Don't go out, stay here," said Shen Qiao quietly.

"I'll just crack open the door and take a look," said Chen Gong. "I'm not gonna do anything."

Just as he spoke, yelling and the sound of fighting came from outside.

Chen Gong was immediately seized by excitement and apprehension. He felt like he'd come another step closer to the jianghu of his fantasies.

But just as he reached to open the door, he felt his fingers go numb, and the entire set of doors blew wide open with a powerful gust that swirled in from outside, its winds mighty like a hurricane.

Unable to dodge in time, Chen Gong cried out in pain as he stumbled backwards. His back slammed into the edge of the bed, instantly turning his cry into a scream.

And that wasn't the end of it because in the next moment, someone clamped their hand around his throat.

The person choking him pressed gently upwards with his arm, and Chen Gong involuntarily flew with the motion. The scene before him changed from within the room to outside of it.

Chen Gong's eyes were wide with fear, but he was completely unable to call out. Just when he'd managed to find his footing, he heard someone laugh and say, "Sanlang,[28] are you stupid? One glance will tell you this kid doesn't know martial arts! There's no way he's a member of the Liuhe Guild—what did you capture him for?"

"What, he's not with the Liuhe Guild? Damn it, no wonder he was such easy pickings. I've just captured some trash!"

The man holding him broke into loud curses, and his grip tightened. The pain was so immense, Chen Gong's eyes watered.

I'm done for! I'm going to be killed!

With that realization, Chen Gong was filled with ten thousand regrets that he hadn't listened to Shen Qiao. That he hadn't just hidden quietly inside the room but had tried to come out and watch the commotion instead.

The jianghu was still far out of his reach, but matters of life and death were close at hand.

Chen Gong felt a sharp burst of pain in his neck—a sign that his throat was about to be crushed.

But a moment later, the man who'd been about to kill him gave a yelp of surprise, snatched back his hand, and moved away. Freed from the pressure, Chen Gong's entire body went limp and he fell to his knees, coughing incessantly.

When Murong Xun had been about to kill Chen Gong, he'd been aware that someone else was in the room, but he hadn't taken the two of them seriously at all—they were small fry. He definitely didn't expect that the other man would have the gall to launch a sneak attack just as he was about to do away with the kid.

The bamboo cane came at him light as a feather, without even a wisp of internal energy behind it, so Murong Xun thought he could grab it easily. But when his hand touched its edge, it slipped bizarrely to the side and thrust toward a key acupoint on his back.

Murong Xun had been forced to release Chen Gong and dodge to the side.

"Who are you?!" He narrowed his eyes at the other man.

"We are not members of the Liuhe Guild, nor are we people of the jianghu. We just happen to be staying here for the night and have nothing to do with your feud. So please, show us some mercy and let us go," said Shen Qiao.

There wasn't enough light for him to see Murong Xun. He could only judge his general location and clasp his hands beseechingly in that direction.

But Murong Xun saw through it at once. "You're blind!"

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Within the span of a night, the tiny Chuyun Temple became the center of a maelstrom.

Although Yun Fuyi had long anticipated a fight, tonight's situation far outstripped her expectations.

As her sleeves rolled up, she sent out a palm strike while floating backwards. Her pose was beautiful and elegant, brimming with immortal grace. To a bystander, she seemed to be drifting in dance—it was unfathomable just how much power was contained within her palm.

One of her opponent's sleeves furled then flicked, easily dispelling Yun Fuyi's attack. But Yun Fuyi spotted two daggers, thin as willow leaves, sliding out from those sleeves. Their blades flashed then quickly vanished, but the crushing wind behind her palm dropped away completely.

This was a dire opponent, Yun Fuyi realized.

"Yun Fuyi: 'From the clouds drift spring rain, on clothes they fall yet leave no stain.' As expected of Liuhe Guild's second-in-command. Outsiders all say that Yun Fuyi is a woman, so she must be merely a figurehead. Clearly such naysayers haven't had the opportunity to appreciate Deputy Leader Yun's capabilities!"

A silent blast of air accompanied these words, gusting towards Yun Fuyi. Her expression shifted slightly. No longer did it show the placid calm with which she'd fought before. She thrust out with a flurry of palm strikes, their shape blooming in the air like a lotus flower, and her true qi rammed forward, firing forward in an even wall.

Only when the two blasts collided did Yun Fuyi realize how unpredictable her opponent's true qi was: sharp as a needle, there was no opening it couldn't slip through. It pierced precisely into even the slightest crack, and when her palm brushed it, a billowing coldness penetrated her flesh and blood, stabbing straight through to her marrow.

She had no time to withdraw; her opponent gave her no time to react. Before the first burst subsided, a second one began, and like the rising spring tide of a river, it flooded into her, wave upon wave. She'd lost this invisible round, so Yun Fuyi thought better of taking the attack head-on and retreated, even though it meant giving up ground.

By the time she landed, a dull pain was already throbbing through her chest, the salty-sweet taste of blood in the back of her throat. She didn't spit it out but swallowed it down, acting as if nothing had happened. "Who is this distinguished master?" she asked.

Her opponent saw Yun Fuyi's lack of reaction and made an incredulous noise. Mild surprise and respect came over his face. "In all of Qi, there are very few who can withstand my palm strike. You are truly quite capable."

"Who is this distinguished master?" Yun Fuyi asked again.

The man arrogantly clasped his hands behind his back and sneered. “You’re in Qi now, and you wish to transport Qi’s items across the border. Is the court not allowed to take an interest? Concerning today’s incident, if the Liuhe Guild is willing to leave the items behind, we won’t trouble you anymore and will guarantee your safe passage out of Qi!”

At his mention of Qi’s imperial court, Yun Fuyi’s heart pounded. She quickly put two and two together. “You’re a member of the Qi Dynasty? You’re Murong Qin?”

The Murong clan had been displaced by the collapse of the Yan Dynasty, and all through the next several dynasties they’d wandered here and there. The current patriarch of the Murong family, Murong Qin, always boasted of being a descendent of the Murong royal family, yet he’d become a lackey in the country of Qi serving its emperor, Gao Wei. It was only due to his reputation as Qi’s number one martial artist that people tried to please him with flattery and blatant displays of admiration.

Under normal circumstances, Yun Fuyi would have no qualms about fighting him. But he was obviously after the cargo she was escorting, and utterly dead set on having them. That meant…

“Where are Liu Qingya and Shangguan Xingchen?” Her expression twisted a touch as she asked after the two hall masters who’d been traveling with her.

Hu Yu and Hu Yan were taken aback. “Hall Masters Liu and Shangguan were both back in the room guarding the cargo, could they be…”

Harshly, Yun Fuyi said, “I didn’t think the Murong Patriarch, Qi’s number one martial artist, would need to bring his men along for an ambush. Wouldn’t it be laughable if word got out!”

Murong Qin smiled mockingly. “Deputy Leader Yun herself has stepped in personally. How could I dare be so arrogant as to come alone? In any case, we’re not the only ones here tonight… Will you still not show yourselves, you rats in the shadows?”

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Chapter 10:
Yan Wushi

AFTER MURONG QIN'S words, it was quiet all around—no one answered him.

Yun Fuyi frowned, recalling that the temple's abbot and the two young monks had yet to appear. She wondered if they'd fainted from fear or if something else had happened to them.

Instead, Murong Xun and Tuoba Liangzhe appeared. They'd been sent out to investigate, and in their grasps now were Shen Qiao and Chen Gong, as well as the two hall masters from the Liuhe Guild.

"Patriarch, those chests just had a bunch of junk in them. What we wanted wasn't there!" Tuoba Liangzhe said while throwing Chen Gong to the ground roughly.

Chen Gong had kept on moaning and wailing in pain on the way there. Irritated, his captor had pressed the boy's acupoint to mute him. At the moment, Chen Gong couldn't make a single noise, but his face was twisted in anguish.

Shen Qiao had been treated a little better, perhaps because the moves he'd used left Murong Xun vaguely unnerved. He was even making sure to firmly restrain Shen Qiao's shoulders.

Liu Qingya and Shangguan Xingchen, the two Liuhe Guild hall masters who were usually so formidable, were currently immobilized, their major acupoints all sealed. They were in a miserable state, faces crumpled in defeat, but they grit their teeth and refused to make a single sound.

Murong Qin cast a look their way. "Deputy Leader Yun, if you still care about the sorry lives of these underlings, then hand over the items."

Yun Fuyi sighed. "Very well. Since the Murong Patriarch only wants the goods we're transporting on our journey. The two chests are in the quarters where Hall Master Liu was staying. Send someone to get them. Clearly, since my skills are inferior to yours, I can't object."

Murong Qin sneered. “Those two chests of yours are just a diversion. Do you still take us for fools? The actual item is probably on your person and has been all this while, no?”

At this, even the Liuhe Guild members looked to Yun Fuyi in surprise.

Her expression darkened. “Where did the Murong Patriarch hear such gossip? And you believe it too? Those chests were entrusted to us. We were tasked with delivering them back to Southern Chen—the owner of the items was clear on this. In fact, he was even your colleague: Xue Rong, the late Junior Preceptor of the Crown Prince. After he passed away from illness, his wives and children tasked the Liuhe Guild with transporting his belongings back to Junior Preceptor Xue’s hometown. He and our guild leader were old friends, so I escorted this order personally. That is all!”

“Those two chests are filled with Xue Rong’s old personal possessions, and most of them are books,” said Murong Qin. “They could have disposed of two chests of books on the spot. Why do they need to be transported such a great distance, from Qi to the south?”

“You’re asking me,” said Yun Fuyi. “Who can I ask?”

“You lot have encountered schemers and robbers since you set out on this trip. Do you really think they came for two chests of Xue Rong’s old books?”

“Perhaps there are some who thought that Junior Preceptor Xue had amassed countless fortunes when alive and that the chests were filled with treasures of gold and silver. They didn’t know that Junior Preceptor Xue was an honest, uncorrupt official who left little behind.”

Coldly, Murong Qin said, “Among Xue Rong’s belongings, there’s a copy of *Canghai Gleanings*. I ask Deputy Leader Yun to hand it over.”

“All the books are within those two chests. Whatever’s there is there, and whatever isn’t is not. They’re already yours to do with what you will. What else can I hand over?”

Murong Qin looked at Murong Xun and his party. “This nephew has already searched everything,” Murong Xun told him. “There’s no book called *Canghai Gleanings*.”

From the middle of the air came a giggle. “The Murong Patriarch is so patient. If you keep beating around the bush like this, I fear that Deputy Leader Yun will simply play dumb to the very end. You might as well say it directly: *Canghai Gleanings* is only a cover. Inside it is the *Zhuyang Strategy*’s Volume of Deluded Thought! Demand that she hand over the *Zhuyang Strategy* scroll!”

Someone else was hiding nearby?

Shock gripped the two brothers, Hu Yan and Hu Yu. They quickly raised their heads and looked around, but saw only a thick sea of branches, not even the hint of a human silhouette among them.

But in the next moment, they spotted another figure standing behind one of the pillars on the colonnade.

For a while now, Chen Gong had been listening to their conversation attentively, despite the pain he was in. But when he realized he couldn’t understand a single sentence, his dream of joining the Liuhe Guild fizzled out completely. He’d taken a real beating and was sweating from the agony. Only when the pain died down a bit did he have the strength to lift his head and look at the newcomer. And the moment he did, he jolted in shock.

They were standing beneath the moonlight, their head was bare and smooth, and their body draped in robes. It was obviously one of Chuyun Temple’s young monks!

Because there’d been female guests at the temple, the two young monks had lent out their room to Yun Fuyi and moved to the communal cots with Chen Gong and the others. The room had been pitch dark when Chen Gong rose from his bed to peek at the commotion, so all he’d known was that the Liuhe Guild’s people were gone. He hadn’t looked carefully to check if the two young monks were still there.

But, listening to it now, this young monk’s voice was completely different than before—it was a delicate female voice!

Chen Gong’s head felt completely muddled, like it was filled with rice paste. He couldn’t figure out exactly what was going on here.

But the others weren’t focused on whether someone had switched places with the monk or if the monk had been an impostor from the beginning.

No, their expressions all changed dramatically the moment she said the words, *"Zhuyang Strategy."*

"And who is this distinguished master," asked Yun Fuyi. "Skulking around like you're ashamed to show yourself in the light?"

"I meant to sneak in quietly, then sneak out with the item the same way," said the "young monk." "But Deputy Leader Yun didn't give me the chance, and the Murong Patriarch intervened in the middle of things. I had no choice but to show myself."

Yun Fuyi frowned, sizing up the new arrival. She couldn't figure out where she'd come from. But the monk continued, smiling, "Deputy Leader Yun thinks herself cautious and discreet, yet she completely failed to notice that from the moment she left the capital, many eyes were on her. The first two batches were just amateurs, not worth mentioning. But tonight, we have a gathering of the outstanding. Other than our Hehuan Sect and the Murong Patriarch, there are still other experts who haven't revealed themselves, are there not? It's a fine night, and we've been given this rare chance to convene. Why don't we call the rest out, so we can all deepen our friendships and have a fruitful discussion about what to do with this *Zhuyang Strategy* scroll? Shall the strongest take all, or shall we rip it into pieces and walk away with one each?"

Her tone was wry and flirtatious, but no one at the temple was laughing.

Yun Fuyi's heart sank.

She could barely handle Murong Qin, and now the treacherous Hehuan Sect was in the mix. The situation had become terribly perilous. Not to mention what the other woman had implied: that there were still others hiding in the shadows, waiting to reveal themselves.

"Deputy Leader Yun, you have seen for yourself how experts have gathered like storm clouds at Chuyun Temple," Murong Qin said sharply. "You cannot handle them all by yourself. If you are willing to hand over the *Zhuyang Strategy*, then in the name of the court I will let you go, and of course will guarantee your safe exit across the border."

"The Murong Patriarch is from the court, yes, but I believe *we* are more qualified to say such words, given Hehuan Sect's influence within

Qi." The young monk spoke while smiling brightly. She walked out from behind the pillar, her face simple and plain.

She barely moved, but off to the side, Murong Xun suddenly uttered a gasp and reeled back sharply, quickly letting go of Shen Qiao.

With only the slightest of movements, Murong Qin flashed in front of Murong Xun, shielding him. Two shimmering lights fired from his sleeves as he lunged straight towards the young monk.

Chen Gong stared numbly as the two fighters' robes and sleeves fluttered beneath the moonlight, light and shadow overlapping, transforming their life-and-death clash into a vision of peach blossoms unfurling in bloom. Abruptly, he realized just how ridiculous it was that he'd resented the Liuhe Guild for refusing him, and just how naive and ignorant was his understanding of the thing called the jianghu.

He couldn't help but look over at Shen Qiao.

He was still holding the bamboo cane in hand, standing still and quiet and half-hidden within the shadows, nearly invisible.

At first glance, the man he knew as Shen Qiao appeared utterly unremarkable. And yet, it seemed some grave mystery lay concealed within him. It made him unreadable and perplexing.

As Murong Qin and the young monk began to exchange blows, Yun Fuyi glanced around the assembled crowd, and her thoughts took a slight turn. Her foot moved along with them.

Her footwork was swift and deft—that one step took her as far as an ordinary person's ten. Her gait was serene and elegant, and like a mere caress on clothes, she left no trace.

However, just as she'd taken this step, a pressure came from behind, as heavy as a mountain, and slammed right into her.

In the middle of their fight, Murong Qin and the young monk had tacitly attacked her as one.

The young monk made sure to mock her with a tinkling laugh. "How dishonest of you, Deputy Leader Yun. Are you trying to walk away and abandon your subordinates? Is this the way the leader of a guild should behave? If word gets out, who'd be willing to follow your orders?"

But Yun Fuyi knew that while the item was still with her, she need not worry about Liu Qingya and the others. Murong Qin clearly thought them beneath him, so for the time being they wouldn't be in any danger. Hence, she'd decided to make a hasty exit by herself. Even though the young monk was trying to provoke her, she spoke not a word—Murong Qin alone required all her attention, and with this Hehuan Sect demoness there too, the pressure she was under doubled.

The three of them stood at the center of a circle, and three bursts of true qi collided in a violent storm. Fearful of being hit by crossfire, the others were forced to withdraw in the face of such a powerful display. But Liu Qingya and Shangguan Xingchen weren't so lucky. They'd been immobilized, and in their misfortune they were both struck by blasts of true qi which left them hacking large mouthfuls of blood. Hu Yan and Hu Yu paled in horror and leapt forward to pull the other two to safety, but they found there was no way they could get near to the three-man battle ring.

On the surface, it looked like the young monk and Murong Qin had joined forces, but in truth they were wary of each other, on guard against backstabbing, and cautious with their attacks. Yun Fuyi had been losing her two-on-one fight, but her opponents' distrust of each other gave her space to eke out a small, precarious balance, and now, with great difficulty, she stood her ground.

But this unsteady equilibrium was soon shattered. Inexplicably, Murong Qin changed his mind. The flash of his dagger swept past Yun Fuyi's face, changed direction, and targeted the young monk instead. It carried a cold, cutting wind, as harsh as ice and frost. The young monk was busy sealing off Yun Fuyi's escape route; when she saw the dagger heading for her, she was forced to dodge. Yet those blades followed like her shadows, unrelenting.

When they'd been attacking a common target, their difference in strength wasn't apparent. But in truth, Murong Qin surpassed the young monk's ability, and now she was in a tight spot. Behind her was a pillar, and above her was the ceiling. She had nowhere to retreat. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Chen Gong and without a second thought, she reached to grab him and use him as a shield.

The moment passed in the blink of an eye. To the unskilled or ignorant in martial arts, the movements would look like lights and shadows blooming and fading—they'd be unable to see any details at all.

Chen Gong hadn't even noticed the little monk reaching towards him—his head was turned to watch Yun Fuyi and Murong Qin.

But Shen Qiao noticed.

He lacked even a scrap of internal energy, recalled very little of his so-called martial arts, and would often forget all sorts of things. His health was poor: from time to time he'd cough up blood, and on top of that, he was completely blind. But he couldn't convince himself to stand by and watch.

So, he chose to save the boy.

Chen Gong still didn't know what was happening when he was shoved, hard, to the ground.

When the young monk saw that her human shield had been replaced by a bamboo cane, a sound of surprise escaped her.

In the span of a breath, the blade arrived. The young monk had no choice but to release the bamboo cane and spread her palm, catching the dagger straight-on.

The blade pierced through her wall of true qi, stabbing right into her palm. If she hadn't gripped it with all her strength, the blade's momentum would have carried it even further.

Instantly, her palm became a mess of flesh and blood.

If that bamboo cane hadn't ruined everything, she would have caught herself a sucker and would never have been injured. Furious, murderous intent bloomed on her face. Ignoring Yun Fuyi and Murong Qin, she curved her fingers into claws and slashed at Shen Qiao!

Murong Qin had given up on Yun Fuyi and turned on the young monk. He knew Yun Fuyi wasn't likely to escape tonight, regardless of who it was she faced.

And indeed, as he'd expected, such an intrusion came: a jade chime rang in the darkness, distant yet clear. When others heard it, they simply heard a bell, the sound almost cleansing. But to Yun Fuyi's ears, it was like a hundred needles piercing her flesh and a thousand swords stabbing at her

heart. She was in agony—even the circulation of her true qi slowed and turned stagnant.

And who was this?

Panic-stricken, Yun Fuyi dropped everything and scrambled to escape, only to find she couldn't move an inch, as if held in place by an invisible net.

She knew her abilities didn't rank in the world's top ten, but she'd never thought she'd find herself so helpless. Only right there, at this moment, did she realize how ridiculously wrong she'd been. The attacker hadn't even revealed himself, and she was already utterly beaten.

Was she really doomed to fail tonight, unable to protect the item in her care? At the thought of it, a thread of despair welled up in Yun Fuyi's heart.

Meanwhile, elsewhere, the young monk clawed at Shen Qiao, her fingers brutal, wild, and swift as lightning.

She might have been weaker than Yun Fuyi and Murong Qin in one-on-one combat, but her skills were more than enough to deal with easy pickings like Shen Qiao.

Shen Qiao had blocked her grab for Chen Gong with superb skill, but he'd also had the advantage of surprise.

With the young monk attacking him seriously, Shen Qiao was completely powerless to counter.

Qi potent enough to overturn rivers and oceans swept toward him in a tidal wave of murderous intent. Though they were five or six paces apart, Shen Qiao was already gasping for breath as bursts of pain tore through his chest. His vision went completely dark, and he couldn't even feel the ground beneath his feet. His entire body went soft and weak except for that one spot in his chest. It burned like fire—a stifling agony that made him long to cough up another glob of blood, desperate for relief.

The young monk couldn't care less about Shen Qiao. To her, this man had poked his nose in her business without even bothering to notice how outclassed he was. Truly, he deserved to die.

Sure, he was good-looking, but so what?

The way she saw it, Shen Qiao was already dead.

Yet, when her fingertips were a hair's breadth from his neck, something else happened.

And it didn't come from Shen Qiao.

A hand appeared out of the darkness, stretching over to grab her by the wrist.

It wasn't fast, and the movement itself was unremarkable, devoid of any flashy maneuvers.

The hand was slender and pale, smooth and unmarred. She could see it was a man's hand, and the hand of someone high-status, who'd enjoyed many luxuries over many years.

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Chapter 11:
Each with Their Own Schemes

THE YOUNG MONK was disinclined to admire this hand. Instead, she was seized with terror.

She had no idea where it had come from and was helpless to resist as it clamped onto her wrist.

"Ahhhh!" A sharp pain radiated from where she'd been grabbed, forcing a cry of pain from her.

Any man who heard her would waver, even if he wasn't usually moved by a pretty face. Unluckily for her, she was wearing the plain and simple face of a monk, so the effect was less than ideal. On top of that, this particular man had a heart of stone—the moment her wrist shattered, she flew up into the air. He'd tossed her away.

Her petite body slammed right into the pillar. It shook with the force of her impact, and the young monk fell to the ground, crying out pitifully while hacking up mouthful after mouthful of blood.

One of her wrists was crushed, and her other hand had been pierced through by the dagger. Both were reduced to a miserable mosaic of flesh and blood.

And yet, she seemed unconcerned. She stared unswervingly at the man who'd injured her, her voice and volume slurring from the blood in her mouth. "Who are you…"

The man in blue said, "No need to stare. Sang Jingxing and Yuan Xiuxiu together couldn't be sure of besting me, let alone you."

Bai Rong's expression shifted. "May I ask for this distinguished master's esteemed name?"

From the sidelines, another person had the answer already. "What are you doing here, Sect Leader Yan?"

Sect Leader Yan… Yan Wushi?!

Bai Rong's eyes flew open in disbelief.

As the topmost disciple in Hehuan Sect, she'd often heard the name Yan Wushi. Though the three demonic sects came from the same roots, they'd been at odds for a long time, and during the ten years that Yan Wushi was off the scene, Hehuan Sect took quite a few opportunities to make trouble for Huanyue Sect and kick them while they were down. Now that Yan Wushi was back in the jianghu, the injuries he'd given her…she couldn't exactly call them unprovoked.

Yan Wushi sneered. "If even a bald old donkey is invited, why can't I come?"

As Yan Wushi spoke, a monk holding a jade chime walked slowly out from the darkness, but he looked nothing like the "bald old donkey" Yan Wushi called him. His face was as smooth as jade, and he couldn't have been far over thirty years old. His monk's robes were snow-white and pristine, and even without speaking, he embodied the phrase, "a monk of the highest enlightenment."

When he revealed himself, Murong Xun and Tuoba Liangzhe, the younger generation, showed little reaction. But Murong Qin and Yun Fuyi's expressions changed completely.

"I never guessed that two such exalted and esteemed people would be found skulking around in the shadows, sneaking into Qi to steal the *Zhuyang Strategy*. Buddhist Master Xueting, the State Preceptor of Zhou, and Sect Leader Yan, a grandmaster of his generation. You're trying to take advantage of the situation for your own gain? How brazen!"

"The Murong Patriarch need not be so agitated," said Buddhist Master Xueting. "Ever since the Duke of Jin's death, His Majesty of Zhou has prohibited both Buddhism and Daoism. This humble monk has long ceased to be the State Preceptor of Zhou. I only came here tonight at the request of an old friend, and I hope that Deputy Leader Yun can give the item to me, so that I may return it to its original owner. That way, I can grant his long-cherished wish."

Bai Rong spat out a frothy mouthful of blood and giggled. "I have never seen a monk so shameless! It's obvious you have designs on the treasure, yet you invent this old friend's request. Everyone knows that the *Zhuyang Strategy* has been without an owner since Tao Hongjing died. Tao

Hongjing came to you in a dream, did he? And did he ask you to collect the *Zhuyang Strategy*, then send it to him by burning it?"[29]

Buddhist Master Xueting showed no emotion and put his hands together. It was as if he hadn't heard Bai Rong's words at all.

With the addition of these two men, Murong Qin and Bai Rong didn't dare to venture another attack on Yun Fuyi, but Yun Fuyi didn't feel the slightest bit of relief—on the contrary, her mood sank even lower.

Since Qi Fengge's passing, there'd been no martial artist whose capabilities could surpass the top ten.

Buddhist Master Xueting and Yan Wushi both ranked in the top ten. Xueting's sheer power was too great to measure but likely placed him in the top three. Yan Wushi had been missing for many years, but the moment he'd resurfaced within the jianghu, he'd thoroughly overpowered the martial expert of the Göktürks' new generation, Kunye. And it was Kunye who'd defeated Xuandu Mountain's sect leader.

Yun Fuyi couldn't handle either one of them. Who could have known that both would show up at once!

Thinking of how their guild leader Dou Yanshan had entrusted this mission to her put a bitter taste in her mouth.

It wasn't that she didn't want to try her best. But the way things went tonight was seriously unprecedented.

All of these people were indeed at odds with each other, but they all shared a common goal: the *Zhuyang Strategy* scroll that she had in her possession.

Tao Hongjing's *Zhuyang Strategy* was divided into five volumes—Conscious Mind, Corrupted Anima, Lost Soul, Clouded Essence, and Deluded Thought. The five volumes were also matched to the Five Phases and corresponded to the vital organs of the human body.[30] The complete set was a fusion of all three schools of thought and considered one of a kind; a book of legend. Three volumes had been located: one in Zhou's inner palace, one on Xuandu Mountain, and the last in Tiantai Sect. The whereabouts of the other two were unknown.

With the scrolls they had in hand, Xuandu Mountain and Tiantai Sect were secure in their places as two of the world's greatest martial sects, standing over the schools of Daoism and Buddhism respectively. It was by this very stroke of luck that Qi Fengge became the number one martial expert in the world.

Yes, his disciple Shen Qiao was rather disappointing, and he'd even gotten himself thrown off a mountain in defeat. But that was only because Shen Qiao's learning was unrefined, it had nothing to do with the *Zhuyang Strategy*. If someone possessed just one volume and absorbed all it had to give, comprehended its subtleties, then that might be enough to propel them to Qi Fengge's level—they'd become the number one martial artist in the world.

Currently, the three volumes that had been accounted for were properly stored away by their respective sects. It wouldn't be easy for anyone to take them by force. But the last two volumes were without an owner, there for the taking by those who were capable. Hence, when news quietly spread that Yun Fuyi was carrying one such *Zhuyang Strategy* scroll, their group was beset by wave after wave of robbers.

The Liuhe Guild hadn't known the truth; they really did believe the two chests they transported were hiding some sort of rare treasure. When they heard that Yun Fuyi carried the *Zhuyang Strategy* with her, they were all stunned, frozen, and had yet to recover.

In the silence of this many-sided stalemate, each party regarded the others with wary apprehension. Not one dared to make the first move.

Murong Qin wanted to take the scroll by force, but he knew for certain that the moment he tried something, the monk Xueting and Yan Wushi would move to stop him.

Yun Fuyi stood at the center of this vortex, brimming with silent anxiety, but there was nothing she could do.

Even if she made it through tonight, tomorrow the news would spread further. She knew that more and more people would come after the treasure. If she didn't resolve this, even Mount Tai's Bixia Sect and Linchuan Academy might catch the scent of blood in the water. If that happened, how would the Liuhe Guild ever know peace again?

She decided then and there to abandon her original plan, settling for the next best option. She chose the one person on the scene who looked the most trustworthy. “The saying is true,” she said. “‘Only the capable achieve their aims.’ The Liuhe Guild lacks the strength hold onto the treasure: instead of a blessing, for us it’s a curse. I’m willing to hand over the *Zhuyang Strategy* in exchange for peace. I ask the Great Master, if I give you the *Zhuyang Strategy* scroll, can you guarantee the safety of me and my subordinates?”

Buddhist Master Xueting chanted a name of Buddha, then said, “Deputy Leader Yun is deeply principled. This humble monk will do his utmost to fulfill her request.”

Yun Fuyi went back and forth in her mind weighing, considering, then weighing again. Finally, she grit her teeth and fished a small bamboo tube out of her lapel. Hu Yan and Hu Yu craned their necks to gape at it, and even Bai Rong couldn’t help but straighten up and pay attention. It was hard to imagine that this ordinary bamboo tube, thinner than a woman’s wrist, could contain one of the *Zhuyang Strategy* scrolls that everyone in the world desired.

Since she was unable to fight with her injured hands, Bai Rong simply leaned against a pillar and watched the show.

But Murong Qin had transformed into a shadow at once and was already targeting that tube.

Before he could get close to Yun Fuyi, the wind from Buddhist Master Xueting’s palm fluttered to him from behind, carrying on it the unceasing rings of the jade chime. The sound could pierce right through to one’s heart, and when it hit Murong Qin’s ears, he was just as stricken as Yun Fuyi had been. His feet weighed a thousand pounds or more, his chest went stiflingly tight, and he wanted to vomit.

He knew that it must be the jade chime’s influence, so he blocked out the noise as well as he could and continued to move. He kept reaching out toward the tube in Yun Fuyi’s hands.

Yan Wushi moved to interfere as well, though none could say why. His body barely moved, and without even a flicker of shadow, he was standing behind Murong Qin.

He reached out, but it wasn't to stop Murong Qin from grabbing the tube. Instead, it was to stop Buddhist Master Xueting.

In the space of a moment, they exchanged no less than several dozen moves. Of course, Chen Gong was dazzled watching this, and he had no idea what was happening—even rising stars like Hu Yan and Hu Yu were in a fog of confusion.

Chen Gong's head was spinning, but he couldn't make himself look away. While he was absorbed, Shen Qiao grabbed his shoulder and whispered, "Get up, go!"

Typically, whenever Shen Qiao said one line, Chen Gong would counter with three, but just this once, he obeyed without a word. He set his jaw, struggling to stand up and make a run for it.

But just when he'd gotten to his feet, Chen Gong felt a strong force take hold of him by the back and lift him up. His whole body soared high into the air. He screamed in a panic; he couldn't help it. When Yan Wushi tossed him down onto the roof, Chen Gong's legs gave out and he fell right to his knees, nearly tumbling right back down to the ground.

He'd been terribly unlucky this entire night. His heart quailed in despair as he looked up and saw someone else standing next to Yan Wushi.

Shen Qiao had been dragged up there with him.

Shen Qiao was even holding a bamboo tube—forced into his hand by Yan Wushi—and he was at a loss as to whether to hold onto it or toss it away. Bewildered and helpless, he said, "We're only insignificant people rooming here for the night. We're completely unrelated to the affairs of the jianghu. All debts have their debtors, so can Sect Leader Yan please not toy with us?"

Yan Wushi was all smiles. "How can you say I'm toying with you? I'm giving you two a huge advantage, something everyone under heaven desires. And right now, it's in your hands. Are you really not even the slightest bit happy?"

Who could have dreamed that Yan Wushi would step in only to hand the bamboo tube over to two unrelated, utterly insignificant people. Immediately, everyone on the scene was staring at Shen Qiao with blazing intensity, as if trying with all their might to burn a hole right through him.

Buddhist Master Xueting frowned. “Why is Sect Leader Yan involving outsiders in this?”

Yan Wushi fussed carelessly with a jade tassel tied to his robe. “Don’t you all want to see what’s written in there? There’s no point to all this fighting—it’s better if everyone gets a share. Of course, if I were to read the scroll aloud, no one would believe me. And if *you* were to read it, I wouldn’t believe you either. So, I’ll give it to him to read. That’s better. How much he reads, and how much you hear, will have to depend on your own good fortune.”

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Chapter 12:
Human Nature

MANY PEOPLE had heard of Yan Wushi's unreasonable ways and the irrational steps he'd take. When Bai Rong heard his proposal, she was actually quite pleased.

Tonight, she was the only one present from Hehuan Sect. With the likes of Buddhist Master Xueting and Yan Wushi around, she had absolutely no hope of getting her hands on the *Zhuyang Strategy* scroll, not to mention she'd also been injured.

If they went along with Yan Wushi's suggestion, then as long as she heard a couple of words, she'd not only benefit her martial arts, she'd also have an explanation to give when she got home.

With this in mind, she fixed her gaze on the bamboo tube in Shen Qiao's hand.

Murong Qin's party had the same reaction; only Buddhist Master Xueting objected. "Sect Leader Yan," he said, "this man is an outsider to the jianghu. There are so many who covet the *Zhuyang Strategy* but cannot obtain it. If the news spreads that he recited the scroll today, he's sure to be attacked by some no-good vicious rabble. You wouldn't have killed him, but he'll have died because of you!"

"That's hypocritical of you, isn't it, you bald donkey?" Yan Wushi replied lazily. "You must have read the volume that's in the inner palace of Zhou when you were the State Preceptor. And you used to be a disciple of Tiantai Sect. Your master Huiwen was still alive when you betrayed them. Considering how highly he regarded you, he probably let you read Tiantai Sect's volume too. Add in this volume tonight, and you'll have obtained three of the five volumes. The phrase 'playing the victim after you get away with murder' comes to mind."

Strangely enough, Murong Qin agreed with Yan Wushi. "Great Master, you're a virtuous and noble man. Since you don't wish to listen, just leave. Why stand in everyone else's way? Why give such a meandering,

long-winded speech? Is it because you're disappointed that you can't have it all to yourself?"

Buddhist Master Xueting sighed but finally stopped talking.

Yan Wushi simply pressed two fingers against a key acupoint in Shen Qiao's back, saying to him, "Read."

To everyone else, it looked like Yan Wushi was threatening him. Only Shen Qiao knew that Yan Wushi actually just used some sort of secret method that instantly opened several of his blocked meridians. A warm stream of true qi flowed through his body, and the scene before his eyes gradually cleared. Finally, he could see just as well as anyone.

No one present would suspect that Yan Wushi had saved Shen Qiao's life, but despite that connection between them, Shen Qiao was under no illusion that Yan Wushi held him in any special regard. He had his suspicions about what was really going on, and he felt his own regard for Yan Wushi grow colder at the thought.

Resigned, Shen Qiao lifted the bamboo tube, then slowly unscrewed the cap and pulled out a rolled bamboo slip.

The bamboo had been sliced incredibly thin—once unrolled, it was almost a meter long.

The words written on it were very small, but with his vision temporarily restored, Shen Qiao could just about read them by the light of the moon.

Every gaze in the temple burned into him.

If they could have burned him in truth, Shen Qiao guessed that his body would be scorched to cinders.

He squinted as he examined the words and slowly read them out one by one. "The pancreas conceals the thought; Houtian begets the deluded thought, while Xiantian begets integrity…"

As an ordinary person without any internal energy, his voice wasn't very loud, but most of the listeners present were anything but ordinary, so they could hear and understand clearly.

The writing on the bamboo slip eventually came to an end. No matter how slowly Shen Qiao read, within half an hour, he was finished.

His mouth dry from speaking, he returned the bamboo slip to Yan Wushi, and Yan Wushi's hand withdrew from his back. The ocean of warmth vanished in an instant, and darkness engulfed Shen Qiao's vision once more. On top of that, his eyes began to ache, a searing pain like they'd been burned, perhaps because he'd overtaxed them.

He had to cover his eyes with one hand and steady himself using the bamboo cane with the other, bowing over at the waist as he panted.

Yan Wushi took the slip and paid Shen Qiao no attention. He didn't speak a word, but with a shake of his sleeves and a flick of his hand, the roll of bamboo instantly burst into fine powder and scattered into the air.

Everyone was dumbfounded.

Murong Xun was fiery and young—he couldn't help but yell, "The *Zhuyang Strategy* was incredibly precious, and you destroyed it!"

"Only something that's gone can be called precious," said Yan Wushi coolly. "He's already read it. However much you remember is your own problem."

Murong Xun stared at him, huffing and puffing, speechless.

Yan Wushi dusted off his hands, flicking off the powder that'd fallen on his sleeves. Then he turned right around and left without the slightest care.

Few people in the world could have stopped him. Buddhist Master Xueting didn't move, and so the others could only watch as his silhouette faded into the darkness.

Ignoring her injuries, Bai Rong left just after him. Not to chase after Yan Wushi but to quickly find a place where she could write down everything that she remembered.

Murong Xun and Tuoba Liangzhe both looked to Murong Qin. He thought it over for a moment, then made his decision. "Let's go!"

Without another glance at Yun Fuyi and her people, the three of them turned around and left as well.

Buddhist Master Xueting let out a quiet sigh. "Deputy Leader Yun had a real scare tonight," he said to her. "Please give my humble regards to Guild Leader Dou."

He was part of the group who'd gotten in her way, but now that the scroll was destroyed, Yun Fuyi had no interest in castigating him. "Take care, Great Master," she said coolly.

Once Buddhist Master Xueting was gone, she had Hu Yan and Hu Yu help the two hall masters to their feet, then said to Shen Qiao and Chen Gong, "You suffered an undeserved disaster tonight, and it was all caused by the Liuhe Guild. I apologize deeply for this. I don't know where the two of you are heading next, but if it's convenient and on our way, we can escort you a short distance."

Before, Chen Gong would have been elated at her offer, but the extraordinary events that night had showed him the meaning of the phrase, "always a better person, always a higher sky." His enthusiasm had waned quite a bit. Still, he didn't want to lose this opportunity to enter the jianghu and stewed over how to answer.

Next to him, Shen Qiao took the chance to speak first. "Thank you for your kindness," he said. "We were planning to head south and seek help from our relatives—never did we expect to encounter something like this. We're very afraid now, and only wish to hasten on our journey to arrive at the southern border as soon as possible. We are not people of the jianghu and don't want to be involved in its affairs; please forgive us."

Yun Fuyi mused. "Do you remember the contents of what you read just now?" she asked.

Shen Qiao shook his head. "We've been poor since childhood. My cousin cannot read or write, and I myself only have a rough understanding. I've never read any classics, and my eyes are poor. I don't know what mystic technique that master used, but just now, when he pressed his hand against my back, I was able to see the words upon the bamboo slip. Once I finished and he removed his hand though, I couldn't see anything clearly, let alone recall it."

Yun Fuyi noticed then that his eyes indeed had something wrong with them—they were unfocused, the whites of them faintly blue. Knowing that he wasn't lying, she was a little sorry she'd asked. "Very well. We must set out tonight, so we'll be leaving momentarily. If the two of you ever find yourselves in need of urgent help, you can go to the Liuhe Guild branch within the city and tell them you know me. My name is Yun Fuyi."

Shen Qiao thanked her gratefully. Chen Gong looked at him, then followed suit.

Yun Fuyi's party didn't linger long; they didn't even bother with the two chests they'd brought. Hu Yan and Hu Yu took the injured hall masters, and they all rushed to the city that very night. In no time at all, the large temple was emptied and desolate.

As he watched their figures vanish before him, Chen Gong patted Shen Qiao gently. His voice still low, as if he was afraid of being overheard, and he said, "When she asked us to leave with them just now, why didn't you agree? Wouldn't it be safer?"

Shen Qiao's eyes still ached terribly, but he smiled despite the pain. "Then why didn't you stop me when I answered them just now and say that you wanted to go with them?"

Chen Gong hesitated for a moment. "You're more trustworthy than they are."

Shen Qiao sighed. "Deputy Leader Yun probably invited us along because she was afraid she wouldn't remember everything she'd heard. She hoped we could help her write down the contents of the scroll. The outside world is sure to hear the news about what happened here tonight, and they'll try every trick in the book to get a copy of the scroll. If we went with them, we'd be the first to be abandoned in the face of real danger."

Understanding dawned on Chen Gong. "No wonder! I was wondering why that bitch was being so kind all of a sudden!" he cursed. "Her heart was full of bad intentions the entire time. If you hadn't stopped me, I really would have gone with them!"

"I'm only guessing," said Shen Qiao. "Since the *Zhuyang Strategy* is so precious, they're terrified they'll forget it, so they'll definitely find a place to stop and write it from memory first thing. Whatever they write down will be highly sought-after—everyone will try to get their hands on it. We're not people of the jianghu; if we travel with them, we gain nothing. We'd only get caught up in their disasters."

Chen Gong hung his head, depressed. "You're right. I used to think the Liuhe Guild branch in Funing County looked so mighty and grand, so I wanted to join them. But after tonight, I'm letting go of that fantasy. I don't

know a scrap of martial arts—even if I did get in, I'd only be doing odd jobs for the rest of my life!"

The two of them headed back inside together. Less than half an hour had passed since the incident, and the pain in Shen Qiao's eyes had finally let up a bit. But when he opened them, he couldn't see a thing. They'd returned to their worst state, just as they'd been when he'd first woken up after his fall.

Shen Qiao pondered the move Yan Wushi used on him back on the roof. His vision would almost certainly need several months or even years to return to normal, but Yan Wushi had used some technique that got them working perfectly in an instant. The result allowed him a temporary reprieve from the dark, but it would cost him an even longer recovery.

A wry smile came across Shen Qiao's face.

He'd seen firsthand now how cold and heartless that man was. As for why Yan Wushi had saved him, that probably wasn't out of the goodness of his heart either.

But…was it really just a coincidence that Yan Wushi showed up at the temple tonight?

Chen Gong tugged on his sleeve. "Say…" he said, his tone carrying a slight tremble. "That young monk back there was someone else in disguise. Then, the temple's original abbot and monks…might they… Were they already silenced?"

Shen Qiao didn't answer.

Perhaps that spoke for itself, for Chen Gong's face paled, and he went quiet too.

He'd once prided himself on his fearlessness. Now, for the first time, he became deeply aware of the importance of strength.

In a world like this, without the necessary strength, you could end up as prey at any moment. You could die for no reason whatsoever.

…

The temple's old abbot and the two young monks were indeed dead.

Their corpses were in the old abbot's room, and the murderer hadn't even bothered to cover them up, just left them sprawled awkwardly where they'd fallen. When Chen Gong saw them, his knees went weak with fear. He couldn't muster the strength to properly arrange their bodies. Instead, he simply crawled his way back out, all the way until he saw Shen Qiao. Only then did he calm down a little.

Although Shen Qiao was blind once more, he could still give others some sense of strength just by sitting there quietly.

With trembling lips, Chen Gong asked him, "Did that woman who disguised herself as the monk kill them? Why did she have to kill them? She was so powerful she could have just stopped them from moving or talking."

"Perhaps this is just her style of doing things." Shen Qiao was silent for a moment. "There are some people who need no reason to act. They relish in having power over other people's lives and believe that their whims should override what matters to others."

Chen Gong stared blankly at the ground. The dried blood on the old abbot's body still haunted him. What happened tonight had completely upended all that he'd seen and heard for the past ten-some years of his life, and he was still neck-deep in shock. He couldn't return to his senses for a long time.

I must not become someone who other people will butcher and slaughter. I will become someone with power over others. As Chen Gong thought this, he recalled those great masters he'd seen tonight.

There'd been the calm and collected Buddhist Master Xueting, who was untouched by the mundane world. And then there was the ostentatious and volatile Yan Wushi. This man, who did as he pleased, stirred a greater admiration in Chen Gong.

Shen Qiao didn't know the boy's thoughts and only assumed that he'd been frightened silly. He patted Chen Gong's shoulder. "Meetings are ordained by fate," he said gently. "The old abbot lent us this temple to stay in, and that, too, was a kindness. Tomorrow, let's you and I bury them together."

Chen Gong let out a long breath. "All right."

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Chapter 13:
Dangerous Encounter

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, they hastily buried the abbot and the two monks, then entered the city straight away.

After what happened the night before, Chen Gong had become nervous and jumpy, like a bird that started at the sight of a bow. He was unwilling to stay in the city even a moment too long, and when he saw the local Liuhe Guild branch's signboard in the distance, he refused to move any closer and pulled Shen Qiao in the other direction. He didn't know whether to laugh or to cry at the boy. "No one will notice us," said Shen Qiao. "They don't even know our names. They're interested in other people, not us, so don't worry so much."

Just then, a laugh sputtered from up above them, atop a wall. "I think his concern is somewhat warranted, myself. Although the light was so dim last night that I failed to notice how handsome this gentleman was. I almost passed you right by!"

The voice was sweet and delicate, but more importantly, it was alarmingly familiar.

Chen Gong shuddered with recognition. Lifting his head, he saw a young girl sitting atop the wall, dark-haired and clothed in red. Her hair was bound in a bun by a golden hoop, and she was smiling right at them—a lovely, charming smile. Other than that voice, nothing about her resembled the young monk from the night before.

On any other day of his life, if Chen Gong came face-to-face with such a beautiful girl while walking down the street, he would have been eyeing her up. But he remembered the three dead monks at the temple, and the state he'd found them in. He went cold all over and couldn't muster the courage to give her a second look.

Bai Rong was all smiles. "Why so scared? Shouldn't you be happy to reunite with an old friend? I came here specially to find you!"

Since Shen Qiao couldn't see where she was precisely, he could only cup his hands in greeting in the direction of her voice. "On what business does this maiden seek us out?"

Bai Rong pouted. "Maiden? How dismally formal! My last name is Bai—I'm called Bai Rong. It's also another name for the peony flower, so you can call me Little Peony!"

As she spoke, she leapt from the wall and was in front of them in a flash.

Bai Rong seemed more interested in Shen Qiao, even reaching out a hand to touch his face.

Just before her fingertips reached him, Shen Qiao seemed to sense them and took two steps back.

Bai Rong giggled and got straight to the point. "You were both there last night. One of you read out the scroll, while the other listened from beginning to end, so both of you must remember quite a bit of its contents. Now, I want to write down everything that was on the scroll, but there are some lines I don't remember all too well. Hence, I need your help. As for a reward once we're finished, whether you desire riches or beauties, you'll get whatever you wish for…"

She drawled her final words into a singsong tune, coquettish with a touch of flirtatiousness. It was enough to make any man's heart waver.

Chen Gong's ears went hot, and he was about to agree, when the hand on his shoulder pressed down hard. He came back to his senses and quickly started shaking his head like a rattle-drum. "I can't read or write!"

"You've found the wrong people," added Shen Qiao. "He can't read, and I'm blind. Last night I just recited from the scroll, I didn't take in any of it. Once I was finished, I forgot what it said. I'm afraid we can't help you."

Bai Rong smiled gleefully. "You're all panicky right now, so of course you can't remember. But once you come with me and give it some careful thought, perhaps you'll be able to recall a great deal. Can you really say no to such a pretty face?"

She didn't wait for an answer, reaching out to grab them both straight away.

Alarm bells blared in Chen Gong's mind. His body wanted to run, but for some reason, when he saw her white and slender hand reaching towards him, all the strength dropped out of him. He could only watch as that hand brushed his shoulder, and his legs went weak. He collapsed onto the ground.

"Shimei[31] looks so excited. Is she about to kill someone again?" A youthful face, extraordinarily beautiful, accompanied this voice that sounded so very old.

The man alighted from the wall soft as a feather, then smiled at Bai Rong. Her expression shifted a touch. "You so rarely see your shixiong," he said. "Isn't Shimei happy to see me?"

Reluctantly putting Shen Qiao and Chen Gong aside, Bai Rong focused her energies on dealing with the uninvited guest. "What is Shixiong saying? It just took me a moment to recover from the joy and surprise of seeing you again after so long."

Huo Xijing looked at her, the shadow of a smile upon his face. His gaze swept past Chen Gong and landed on Shen Qiao, regarding him with deep interest. "Such a handsome gentleman you have there. Since you're going to kill him anyway, Shimei, why not give me the skin of his face first? Then you can kill him."

Bai Rong moved smoothly in front of Shen Qiao. "Very funny, Shixiong. I wasn't thinking of killing them. In fact, why *is* Shixiong here? You couldn't have come all this way just to catch up with me."

"I heard that Shimei had the opportunity of a lifetime last night. Since I happened to be passing through, I stopped by to check it out for myself."

"What are you playing at, Shixiong? Your shimei can't understand you at all!"

Huo Xijing gave her a slight snort. "Last night, outside a temple on the outskirts of the city, the Liuhe Guild appeared with a scroll of the *Zhuyang Strategy*. And you were right there on the scene. Word is, before Yan Wushi destroyed the scroll, he made someone read it aloud. With Shimei's wits and intelligence, surely you wrote it down, to hand over to our Shizun, yes?"

Bai Rong stuck out her tongue, pouting like a little girl. “Considering how filial I am to him, of *course* something like this has got to go to Shizun. Surely you didn’t swoop in here to steal the credit from me once you heard the news? I’m afraid I can’t let that happen!”

“Here’s a good idea. How about you give it to me for safekeeping, and we’ll head back to hand it over to Shizun together. That way, we need not fear you losing it.”

Bai Rong laughed. “Does Shixiong take me for a fool?”

Huo Xijing also laughed. “Distrusting your shixiong like this, it makes him so sad!”

These two martial siblings were laughing as they spoke, but each word concealed a knife, and both had their eyes on each other’s openings and weaknesses.

Bai Rong dared not relax for a moment. Even when she knew Shen Qiao was escaping with Chen Gong, she paid them no heed. All her attention was focused on Huo Xijing, afraid of falling to his ploy in a moment of carelessness.

Huo Xijing raised an eyebrow. “They’ve left. Isn’t Shimei going to chase after them?”

Bai Rong was still smiling brightly. “Shixiong is more important to me.”

The words were spoken with deep, lingering affection, but in their hearts, both of them knew it for a lie.

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Chen Gong didn’t even know how Shen Qiao had pulled him up and into a run. He couldn’t see well, and even with his bamboo cane, he still stumbled and tripped as he went. Chen Gong had no strength left in him and could only give directions as he was dragged along behind. After they’d run for over half an hour, Chen Gong finally said, panting, “Stop… Stop running—I can’t run any further…”

Shen Qiao slowed his steps, but the look on his face stayed just as severe. He walked in the direction of the nearest inn.

Chen Gong hastily asked, “Shouldn’t we leave the city? Leave the city right away and run! That way, that demon woman can’t catch us!”

“They’re probably expecting us to leave the city too. All the more reason we can’t. The city is full of people, so it’ll be difficult for them to find us. First, we’ll stay at the inn for the night, then tomorrow we’ll look for a chance to leave. With that man around, her attention will be off us for a while.”

They entered the inn and asked for a room. Chen Gong noticed the heavy exhaustion on Shen Qiao’s face, despite how briskly he’d just been walking. He remembered that Shen Qiao’s body was much weaker than his own and how he normally had to stop and gasp for air every few steps. Feeling a little bad for him, Chen Gong said, “I’ll sleep on the floor tonight. You take the bed.”

Normally, Shen Qiao would humbly refuse, but now he was truly depleted. Ever since Yan Wushi infused him with true qi and he’d overexerted his vision, his body had gone soft. Up until then, he’d been forcing himself to push through it, but now that he’d relaxed, his whole body felt unsteady and on the edge of collapse.

Chen Gong was confused. “They’re martial siblings, shixiong and shimei, so how come they were acting like enemies? That man was also kinda strange: his voice was old, but his face was so young!”

Shen Qiao rubbed at his temples. “That’s because he used a technique called ‘Stolen Sky and Counterfeit Sun.’”

“What’s that mean, ‘Stolen Sky and Counterfeit Sun’?”

He thought to himself that the name sounded pretty imposing.

“It’s a face-changing technique,” said Shen Qiao. “You skin off a person’s face, then use a special technique to fuse it with your own. That way, you can maintain your youthful beauty for all eternity. Those two are both difficult characters to deal with. If it hadn’t been for their bickering, we wouldn’t have been able to escape today.”

“How can there be a technique that horrible?!” Chen Gong blurted out. His hair was standing on end from fear.

Shen Qiao couldn’t force himself to keep going any longer. He simply lay down on his side fully clothed. With a slight curl to his back and a small frown on his stark-white face, he looked like a man on death’s door.

When they’d first started traveling together, Chen Gong had been a little worried that Shen Qiao might collapse at any moment. Later, he realized that Shen Qiao just looked like that every day, and he became accustomed to it.

Something occurred to Chen Gong and he asked, “Hey, didn’t you say you can’t remember anything? Then how did you know that guy used a face-changing technique?”

“Oh,” said Shen Qiao. “Sometimes I can remember a little.”

The corner of Chen Gong’s mouth twitched.

“Go to sleep. We need to wake up early tomorrow.” Obviously, Shen Qiao wasn’t willing to say more; he rolled over and put his back to him.

There was nothing Chen Gong could do but lie down as well.

That night, he had a nightmare. He dreamt that his face had been skinned off and replaced with the wrinkled countenance of an old man. When he looked in the mirror, he could no longer recognize himself. In the end, he woke with a start from the sheer terror of it. Then he looked around and saw that the sun had already risen and that the bed was completely empty.

Shen Qiao was gone.

Shocked, Chen Gong leapt up, his thoughts spiraling. When he touched the bed, he found no residual warmth, and right as he was struggling with whether or not to dash out and search for him, Shen Qiao pushed open the door and walked in.

Chen Gong breathed a sigh of relief. “Where’d you go?”

Although he’d never admit it, over the course of their travels together Chen Gong had gotten used to having Shen Qiao around.

An outside observer might think that Shen Qiao's blindness and poor health was an inconvenience to Chen Gong, who'd have to help him out all the time. But in truth, it was Chen Gong who relied on Shen Qiao for many things. It was thanks to Shen Qiao that they'd been spared many detours.

Shen Qiao closed the door. Softly, he said, "Let's part ways today."

Chen Gong froze. Then he jumped to his feet. "Why?"

"Once Bai Rong and her shixiong have finished arguing with each other, there's a chance they'll come looking for us. As for the Liuhe Guild, although I dissuaded them when they wanted us to travel together, they may very well regret it."

He paused, then sighed. "There's also that Murong Qin. He's likely a martial expert who belongs to the imperial court. It would be easy for him to mobilize government forces to track us down. Although one of us is blind and the other illiterate, the temptation presented by the *Zhuyang Strategy* is irresistible. Many people spend their entire lives in tireless pursuit of it and end up empty-handed, and *we* were able to listen to its contents. Compared to everyone else who was there, we're the softest of persimmons: the weakest and easiest target. Any person from the jianghu could end our lives."

"Then, then what do we do?" Chen Gong stammered. "We didn't mean to listen. Who'd want to listen to something that convoluted?"

"An ordinary man bears no sin, but holding a precious stone will cast him as a sinner. Last night, they saw us together, so that's the impression they received. Today, for the sake of our safety, we must go our separate ways."

Chen Gong was at a loss for a moment. Finally, he came to see that it was a hopeless problem, and this was the only solution. If it came down to a fight, they could be knocked to the ground by a single palm strike. A sense of helplessness welled up inside him, then twisted into an even deeper despair—Chen Gong hated his own powerlessness, but there was nothing he could do.

"…Very well," he said reluctantly and looked at Shen Qiao. "But can you make it on your own?"

Shen Qiao smiled. “Why not? Didn’t you see me doing well on my own back in Funing County?”

After some thought, Chen Gong conceded, but his mood didn’t lift at all. “Then, after we leave the city, will we ever see each other again?”

“That’s up to fate,” said Shen Qiao. “Will you still go to the Liuhe Guild?”

Chen Gong shook his head. He was very certain. “That Deputy Leader already recognizes me. If I go to the Liuhe Guild, I’ll just be walking myself into a trap. Everyone knows that I’ve heard the contents of that stupid scroll, so they’d definitely try to pry something out of me.”

“Then where will you go?”

Chen Gong was depressed. “I’ll take things one step at a time. Maybe when I run out of money, I’ll settle down right then and there. In the end, I gotta eat.”

“The Liuhe Guild is a major organization after all, so their threshold for entry is high. Even if you manage to get in, they might not treat you well. Why not seek out a small guild that’s upright and just? With your intelligence, I’m sure you’ll find success very quickly.”

“Whatever, I just don’t want to head south anymore. I want to go north instead, to go check out Yecheng. I’ve heard that it’s really booming, so there should be a lot of chances to get ahead.”

Chen Gong said this without much enthusiasm. He didn’t have many belongings to pack—all he had with him were two old pieces of clothing. Once he’d fastened his sack, he could leave. Before he did, he looked back and saw Shen Qiao sitting there quietly, bamboo cane in front of him. Although his eyes lacked any life, his face was turned in Chen Gong’s direction, as if to see him off.

For some reason, Chen Gong felt a lump in his throat. “You… You take care.”

Shen Qiao nodded. “You as well.”

They were two people who’d met by chance like drifting duckweed. Fate ordained that they travel together, and now, as fate would have it, they

were parting ways. It was a remarkably common situation, but the teenaged Chen Gong had not yet learned to take such things in stride.

Shortly after Chen Gong left, Shen Qiao packed his clothes and prepared to leave the city. He had picked the south gate, so as not to bump into Chen Gong. The two of them going their separate ways made each one less of a target, but Shen Qiao had other reasons as well.

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On the way out of the city, Chen Gong was in a constant state of apprehension. Only when he saw that no one had tailed him or headed him off, was his mind finally put at ease.

Huai Province was close to Zhou and was frequented by merchants traveling back and forth from one to the other. During the day, people even gathered outside the city gates picking through the wares for sale, their shouts rising and falling in turn, making for quite a lively scene. Initially, Chen Gong had been so preoccupied with avoiding those powerful characters that he hadn't had time to give his surroundings a close look. Now that he found himself in a busy market, a teenaged youth's love of watching the hustle and bustle reared up again.

But he didn't dare wander about too much; after a quick look around and buying two steaming pieces of flatbread for the road, fresh off the stove, he followed the main road north.

After a hundred or so steps, he heard a stampede of horses' hooves, interspersed with the sounds of screaming and crying. Chen Gong quickly turned around and saw several people charging out from the city at full speed, running in his direction. Behind them followed a large troop of men atop horses, armed with bows and arrows, galloping wildly.

He didn't know what was going on and stood there blankly for a moment, watching as all those people drew closer and closer. The men on horseback had already drawn their bows and nocked their arrows, preparing to shoot in his direction. Seeing that, Chen Gong was scared out of his stupor and instinctively began running as well, his mind still in a muddle,

bewildered that such a scene could suddenly pop up when everything had been perfectly fine just a moment before.

He wasn't the only one. The commoners at the city gates were also in complete chaos, fleeing in all directions, screaming over and over again in alarm.

Chen Gong dared not look back. He sprinted forward like his life was on the line. His luck was seriously abysmal, he thought to himself. Things like this happened wherever he went.

After he'd been running for a while, there came the sound of an arrow whistling through the air. It whizzed past Chen Gong's ear and sliced into the thick brush right in front of him!

He went weak in the knees and almost fell straight down onto his face.

From behind him came intermittent screams and sounds of people falling, along with the distant, drifting laughter of the men on horseback, who sounded very pleased.

He even heard someone fawning: "The Commandery Prince[32] is truly a great archer. This must be what they mean by 'piercing a willow leaf from a hundred paces.' And not a single shot missed!"

The laughter stopped abruptly as the man responsible abruptly raised his voice. "The fastest runner in the front there, don't target him, any of you! He's mine."

Who could run faster than Chen Gong? No one!

All of a sudden, he understood what was going on!

Most dignitaries loved hunting, but some were especially perverse. What they loved to hunt weren't animals but live people. They'd release prisoners and slaves, command them to run with all their might, and shoot arrows at them with no regard for whether they lived or died. They called it "human hunting."

Chen Gong had only heard about it after he left Funing County. At the time, he'd found it outlandish and clicked his tongue at the idea. But now that it was actually happening to him, exactly like a tale from the storyteller, it wasn't amusing in the slightest.

Knowing now that the stories were true, his heart pounded like a drum—it was about to thump out of his chest!

All of a sudden, Chen Gong stopped and turned around. Prostrating himself on the ground, he begged loudly, "Please have mercy, Your Excellency! Please have mercy! I'm not prey, much less a prisoner or a slave! I'm a good citizen!"

"So what? If this prince wishes to kill you, he can!" The man at the head of the hunting party laughed, utterly unconcerned. When he got a good look at Chen Gong, though, he made a sound of surprise. "You. Raise your head so I can see you."

Steeling himself, Chen Gong looked up, fear and dread written all over his face.

But Mu Tipo was amused by what he saw. "Your complexion's a little dark, but it's still quite delicate, and your limbs look supple too. If I were to spare your life, what would you give me in return?"

Chen Gong was still in a muddle. "This lowly commoner is willing to be a beast of burden for your esteemed self, or is happy to be banished by Your Excellency…"

Mu Tipo chuckled. "Very well! Someone come and take him back and clean him for me!"

Chen Gong had left home at a young age, and was by no means ignorant of the ways of the world. When he saw how the gathered crowd looked at him with strange expressions, and put it together with what the man had said, he figured it out: he'd been taken as a male concubine!

Male concubines weren't uncommon in Qi, especially in the upper echelons of the nobility, as the few generations of Qi's emperors had taken both men and women as partners. Since subordinates followed their leaders' example, the lower-levels of the nobles became quite interested in homosexuality as well.

Chen Gong wasn't aware that he'd caught the eye of the most famous official, and most favored of the Emperor of Qi himself, but nevertheless he felt his soul about to flee in terror. He kowtowed and exclaimed, "Spare me, Your Excellency! There's nothing charming about me! I don't want to go back with you!"

Mu Tipo's expression went dark.

Chen Gong's heart thundered in his chest.

He'd picked up a couple of moves from Shen Qiao, but here he stood against a large troop of armed men on horses, their eyes ablaze. His rough, scanty martial arts would be completely useless. He'd probably be pierced through by ten thousand arrows before he took one step.

Once, Chen Gong had thought himself fearless. At this moment, he felt childish and ridiculous. He hadn't been afraid before because he was always in situations that he knew how to handle. But now he was terrified. Because when it came to these influential bigwigs before him, who he knew nothing of, Chen Gong didn't need to know who they were exactly to understand that he absolutely must not provoke them.

An attendant laughed from the sidelines. "Commandery Prince, this lowly one has never seen anyone so tactless before!"

Another person echoed him. "Truly! This boy isn't even especially beautiful. It's his great fortune that the Commandery Prince took a liking to him, yet he still has the gall to refuse! He might as well be shot dead on the spot!"

Mu Tipo's eyes narrowed, and he slowly raised the bow and arrow in his hand.

"Your Excellency, please allow this lowly one to explain!"

Chen Gong's mind buzzed, then abruptly went blank. With no time to think it through, he blurted out, "This lowly one lacks charm and is unworthy of such high regard from Your Excellency, but this lowly one knows…knows a man! That man is much better looking than I am—no, no, he's better looking than all of these people Your Excellency has with you combined!"

All those following behind Mu Tipo were beautiful men. When they heard Chen Gong, they burst into laughter, ridiculing him for being rustic and unworldly.

"Look at this hillbilly! And he actually thinks he's seen a man more beautiful than us!"

Mu Tipo didn't speak. He already had a white-plumed arrow in his hand; he seemed ready to nock it and shoot.

Chen Gong was drenched in a cold sweat. This was a critical, life-and-death moment—he couldn't afford to have second thoughts. "He's right here in the city!" he said loudly. "We've only just parted ways—if Your Excellency doesn't believe me, I can take you to him. He's a natural beauty, but his eyes don't work so well. He's a blind man, so I'm…I'm afraid that Your Excellency will find him unsatisfactory."

When he heard Chen Gong say the man was blind, Mu Tipo finally took a little interest. "Come to think of it, I've never played with a blind man before," he said. "I suppose that means when I tie him to the bed, I won't have to blindfold him?"

His frivolous tone drew a wave of low, sinister laughter.

Now Chen Gong saw just how loathsome these men were, but he'd already said what he'd said, and it was too late for regrets. He thought to himself: Shen Qiao was more skilled than him, so perhaps he'd be able to beat these people back. Or, perhaps by the time they got there, Shen Qiao would have left already.

This chaotic jumble flashed through his mind as he stayed frozen in place, unmoving. An attendant rode up to him, chin held high. "Hurry up and take us there!"

Chen Gong gritted his teeth. "Your Excellency…in truth… In truth, the man is in poor health, even though he's good-looking. I'm afraid it will spoil your mood…"

"Isn't that even better?" Mu Tipo said blithely. "A sickly man can be enjoyable is his own way. If he dies while I'm playing with him, it'd be because of his poor health, it can't be blamed on me! But if you don't want to lead us to him, you can be his substitute. You're healthy, so it'll be fine no matter how I play with you. I'll strip you bare and let my pet wolfdogs play with you, how about that? They just happen to be in heat now, and I was worried that I wouldn't be able to find mates for them!"

Chen Gong's eyes went wide. He'd never imagined that the world would have such cruel and savage people in it. Mu Tipo's threats left him trembling all over, and he could no longer muster up the will to resist.

Don't blame me, Shen Qiao. I was forced to, he thought to himself.

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Chen Gong led the large troop of men on horseback into the city. When they arrived at the inn, only a half day had passed since he'd left.

The innkeeper still remembered him. When he saw that Chen Gong had returned and saw who he was with, he dared not ignore the boy and rushed to welcome him. "This is…"

Chen Gong couldn't help but glance back at Mu Tipo, who was frowning and covering his nose at the sight of the inn's humble interior. He sent a few attendants inside with Chen Gong to keep an eye on him.

"The man who stayed with me, is he still here?" Chen Gong motioned at his eyes. "His eyes aren't very good, and he has a bamboo cane."

"Yes, yes, he's here," the innkeeper quickly replied. "He's still in the room and hasn't come down."

Chen Gong's heart filled with joy, swiftly followed by a small wave of guilt. But the guilty feeling didn't last long before it was interrupted.

Mu Tipo's attendant frowned. "What are you dawdling for?!" he yelled. "Take us up there!"

The man was coated in powder, and the scent of something pretentious and gaudy seemed to waft from him. Chen Gong didn't even want to look at him more than once, but he had no way to defy his words. He had no choice but to bring everyone up the stairs, although he went very slowly. Part of him hoped that Shen Qiao had in fact left, but another part hoped he was still there.

Chen Gong led the group upstairs and knocked.

After three knocks, a familiar voice came from inside. "Who is it?"

Chen Gong couldn't have said what he felt in that moment. He swallowed, then said, "It's me."

“Chen Gong? Why did you return? Quickly, come in.” Shen Qiao was a little surprised, but his voice was as calm as ever.

Full of conflicting emotions, Chen Gong felt the guilt rise in him again.

“Why aren’t you going in?” Impatient, Mu Tipo’s attendant gave him a hard shove.

Chen Gong stumbled forwards, ramming the door open along the way.

Shen Qiao was sitting by the window with his face turned slightly towards it, as if enjoying the scenery outside. But Chen Gong knew that since that night at the temple, Shen Qiao hadn’t been able to see anything at all.

“Pah, so that’s your so-called beauty? He’s not much…”

The attendant’s words ground to a halt when Shen Qiao turned his head towards them, and it became difficult to continue.

Mu Tipo had waited himself into impatience and decided to come upstairs personally. His eyes lit up when he saw Shen Qiao.

Mu Tipo came from a poor background. But then his mother gained influence, while he himself ended up close friends with the emperor, and through these associations he was able to live a life of extravagance. His origins meant he placed great deal of importance on dress—he wouldn’t let anyone in his sight whose clothes and adornments lacked the proper splendor.

Shen Qiao’s clothes were of plain materials, and his hair was pulled into a simple bun. He didn’t even have a jade hairpin. It was only held in place by a strip of sky-blue ribbon, the same color as his clothing.

And yet, Mu Tipo couldn’t tear his eyes away from him.

Those rough garments did nothing to conceal Shen Qiao’s overwhelming beauty.

When Shen Qiao turned his face over at him, expressionless, Mu Tipo’s mouth went dry. He could barely restrain himself from going right up and pushing him down, ripping open those clothes, and ravaging him.

“Chen Gong, whom did you bring here with you?”

When he heard that gently bewildered voice, Mu Tipo’s excitement swelled.

What would this man taste like, he wondered, with his brows pinched and crying out?

Mu Tipo had even already decided to hold this man here in Huai Province first, until he’d played with him enough. Then he’d send him to Emperor Gao Wei of Qi. Gao Wei was like him—he always loved playing with unusual things. If Mu Tipo sent this blind beauty to him, the emperor would undoubtedly be very pleased.

“What is your name?” he asked Shen Qiao.

Shen Qiao knit his brows but did not answer. He only said, “Chen Gong?”

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Chapter 14:
Betrayal

CHEN GONG knew that Shen Qiao couldn't see him, but he still shrank from his line of sight.

Mu Tipo chortled at this. "Chen Gong told me that there was a beauty here, one a hundred times more beautiful than all my men. At first, I didn't believe him. I thought this kid hadn't seen enough of the world and was only spewing nonsense. So, I came with him to take look. But now that I've seen you, I know he wasn't exaggerating."

Shen Qiao was silent, his expression blank.

Mu Tipo thought nothing of his reaction. "I am the Prince of Chengyang Commandery, Mu Tipo. I am greatly in His Majesty's favor these days. If you're willing to come with me, from now on you'll receive only the best of food and apparel, you'll be honored and live in splendor. You needn't stay in such a crude place."

Only then did Shen Qiao sigh. "Chen Gong, did you tell him where I was?"

Chen Gong was miserable, but he forged ahead. "I had no choice! If I didn't bring him here, I'd have had to go work as a beast of burden for Mu… Commandery Prince Mu!"

Shen Qiao shook his head. "Then you should ask this Prince of Chengyang Commandery whether he's willing to let you go."

Mu Tipo laughed. "That's right, though this kid can't compare to even one finger of your hand. But, he's whole and he's healthy, and his mind agile. His face isn't bad either; good enough to be a servant!"

Chen Gong was stunned. "You said you'd let me go!"

Mu Tipo paid the boy no heed at all. At the wave of his hand, his attendants stepped forward and grabbed Chen Gong.

Meanwhile, Mu Tipo approached Shen Qiao.

Perhaps sensing his approach, Shen Qiao finally stood, supporting himself with the edge of the table. It almost looked as if he was about to bow to the County Prince in greeting.

A smile tugged up the corner of Mu Tipo's mouth. All was going as expected.

In the face of power and influence, no one could escape either fear or envy. The fearful trembled in trepidation, while the envious were drawn as moths to a flame. Even if a man seemed reluctant now, he would soon become accustomed to the riches and wealth, the allure of women, and even come to love them. Even if he wanted out someday, by that point, it wouldn't be up to him.

"What is your name?" asked Mu Tipo.

"My name is Shen Qiao."

"Qiao, as in Da-Qiao and Xiao-Qiao?[33] A rather fitting name."

"Qiao, as in mountain peak."

Mu Tipo raised an eyebrow and smiled. "As in, 'The hundred gods does he placate, the peaks and rivers all come partake'?[34] This Qiao is a little harsh, not a fitting name for a beauty."

Shen Qiao did not return his smile. "I think it's a good name."

"Fine, fine. As long as you like it. Do you have a courtesy name?[35] Or shall I call you Xiao-Qiao? A-Qiao?" Mu Tipo was smiling as he spoke, his tone doting and gracious.

Shen Qiao bent to pick up the bamboo cane. As he did, his collar drooped to reveal a glimpse of his neck, snow-white and slender, enough to elicit fanciful thoughts.

An itch spread in Mu Tipo's heart. He couldn't resist reaching out to touch him. He wanted to pull that man into his arms, to draw them intimately together.

Shen Qiao's body temperature was on the low side, and he'd lost weight due to his illness. When Mu Tipo grasped his wrist, he could feel the bones protruding beneath his thin skin.

On any other day, given Mu Tipo's high standards for beauties, he'd have written Shen Qiao off, saying that he felt too bony to hold. But today, Mu Tipo's heart jolted with eager impatience.

"A-Qiao…" That was all he said.

And that was all he had time to say.

For just then, Mu Tipo felt a pain in his chest.

He looked down. The bamboo cane had somehow gotten in front of him and jabbed right into the spot above his heart.

Mu Tipo reacted quickly—after the pain, he leaned his torso back smoothly, one of his hands moving to grab the cane while the other struck out at Shen Qiao.

He wasn't a forgiving person, and that this fragile, harmless-looking beauty had the cheek to attack him unawares made him all the more furious. The blow he struck was merciless.

Mu Tipo was also a martial artist. Even though his level was only second- or third-rate, if he really hit Shen Qiao with a palm strike it would seriously injure him, if not kill him outright.

However, in an unexpected turn of events, the cane Mu Tipo had gripped so securely slipped nimbly out of his hand and out of his control.

Not only that, his striking hand failed to connect.

This man he'd thought a sickly beauty had evaded the attack using extraordinary footwork and even countered it by hitting Mu Tipo's waist with his cane.

Shen Qiao had no internal energy, so he couldn't seriously injure Mu Tipo, but the blow caught him right at the weakest point in his ribs. Taken by surprise, Mu Tipo didn't use his true qi to shield himself, so the hit was painful—so painful that tears came to his eyes. He cried out involuntarily and quickly stepped away.

Only then did his retinue of attendants pull themselves together: some came forward to support Mu Tipo, while others swarmed around Shen Qiao, ready to take him down.

Mu Tipo never thought he'd suffer such humiliation. His face grew stormy, dark, and violent. He glared viciously at Shen Qiao, naked rage shining in his eyes. He'd already thought up hundreds of ways to torture him. "Capture him alive!"

The attendants Mu Tipo brought with him didn't lack for skill. Secure in their superior numbers, they weren't taking this blind, sickly man seriously at all. But each and every one of them was met with defeat.

With just one bamboo cane, he held them all at bay.

And that wasn't all. Shen Qiao seemed to know that Mu Tipo's party was large in number, for he wasted no time. His attacks became increasingly ruthless. His face, normally so delicate, froze over with a layer of cold severity. One man tried to circle around and seize him from behind. He was immediately smacked away by the cane, sent staggering back several paces. Merciless, Shen Qiao followed up by shoving him straight out the window.

Screams drifted up from two floors down. The crowd of men grew fearful. For a moment, they forgot to move.

"Anyone else want to try?"

Shen Qiao's face was inscrutable as he seemed to watch them. With a light tap, he set the end of his cane onto the floor and stood, firm and immovable.

Though his complexion was still pale, a faint, forbidding chill had settled over it.

Chen Gong was dumbfounded.

When he'd watched Shen Qiao beat back the beggars, they'd still been in the broken-down temple. He'd known then that Shen Qiao had probably been a martial expert back before he lost his memory and fell ill. But after that, he'd seen the likes of Yan Wushi and Xueting fight, and it was like his view had broadened—he didn't think Shen Qiao was particularly powerful anymore.

Until just then, Chen Gong thought he'd glimpsed many of the secrets this man held. But it seemed he was still in the dark, completely clueless.

Mu Tipo felt humiliated. He was furious with Shen Qiao, and he was frustrated by him. One moment he wanted to kill the man, but the next he felt like killing him wouldn't be enough, that he had to catch him alive, take him away, fuck him eight or ten times, and then toss him to his subordinates and let them play with him until he died. Only then would the rage in his heart be relieved.

He looked left and right, seeing the hesitation on everyone's face and their reluctance to move. "There's so many of you and you can't defeat one blind man? If nothing else, you can crush him to death with the weight of your bodies!" he cursed.

Still, his men hesitated. Mainly because they'd been cowed by the fight and were all nursing some injury or another. None of them had thought that Shen Qiao could use a bamboo cane to do such damage.

Shen Qiao's expression was indifferent. He stood there without speaking and seemed to be waiting for them to either leave or continue their provocations.

Mu Tipo sneered. "You didn't use any internal energy. You won't be able to hold on for long with only clever tricks. My men have surrounded the inn. If you're sensible, you'll kneel down obediently and beg for mercy. I might still give you a way out. Otherwise…"

"Otherwise what?" asked Shen Qiao.

Mu Tipo's face turned savage. "Otherwise…"

Before he could finish speaking, he saw Shen Qiao's palm strike out sideways.

They were shocked—they'd all thought Shen Qiao had no internal energy. His strike whipped up an air current, blowing the cabinet right over.

Startled, they were forced to evade. Mu Tipo was right nearby the cabinet and he had nowhere to retreat, but could only dodge to the side. Shen Qiao took advantage of his movement to strike Mu Tipo in the back.

Mu Tipo immediately counterattacked, but he'd fallen right into Shen Qiao's trap: with a furl of his sleeve, Shen Qiao snagged his wrist and pulled Mu Tipo to the window. He wrapped his other hand around the Commandery Prince's throat.

When the men saw this, they dared not move.

Mu Tipo was appalled by the power in that thin, bony wrist. It choked him, squeezing him until he couldn't breathe, and the other hand clamped hard over his gate of life,[36] so he was too afraid to use his true qi.

"If you do this…you'll—" he gasped and coughed, "—only bring about your death!" After playing the hawk for so long, Mu Tipo never thought he'd have his eyes pecked out by a true raptor. He was half-mad with rage but too afraid to make any sudden movements.

But who could have anticipated it? Despite Shen Qiao's appearance, he'd still made complete fools out of them all.

"Whether or not it'll bring about my death, I do not know. But I do know that if you don't let me leave here today, you'll die first." Shen Qiao's voice was calm and quiet, not a spark of anger in it at all. Occasionally it was even broken by a slight cough. "In exchange for my own insignificant life, I'd take the life of Your Excellency? That's a fantastic deal."

How on earth had he judged so poorly! Mu Tipo had actually thought this man harmless and weak.

With no way out, Mu Tipo had no choice but to tell his glaring attendants to stand down. "Go outside and tell them all to withdraw!"

Shen Qiao sighed. "If only the Commandery Prince had been so cooperative earlier. Go, and please escort me outside the city, then call a carriage for me."

"What's the use of a carriage when you're blind?" Mu Tipo sneered. "Or do you want me to send you a coachman too?"

Shen Qiao mused over this. "Commandery Prince Mu has a good point. Please accompany me for some time. I'm sure the coachman won't dare disobey."

Mu Tipo fumed.

And so, they headed out together, and Mu Tipo was forced into the carriage. With the Commandery Prince present, the coachman dared not question.

The carriage headed west, traveling for two days and a night, until they approached the border with Northern Zhou. Once he was sure Mu

Tipo's entourage couldn't catch up to them, Shen Qiao finally let the coachman leave with the carriage. Then, with Mu Tipo as his hostage, he entered an inn close to the border in Yanshou County. He knocked the prince out, castrated him to prevent him from harming others in the future, and then tossed him into a random room at the inn. Only when all this was done did Shen Qiao leave, alone.

Once outside of the inn, he headed briskly in the direction of the city gates. He only made it a couple of steps before he was forced to stop. He sought out an out-of-the-way, deserted alley corner and leaned against the wall. He was spent, exhausted, and couldn't hold himself up any longer. Bending over at the waist, he coughed up a large mouthful of blood.

From beside him came the mocking sound of a laugh.

Shen Qiao didn't need to look up to know who it was. He wiped away the blood from the corner of his mouth with a sleeve, then simply slid down the wall and sat.

At some point, a man in blue had appeared. His face was handsome, his demeanor imperious. At the corners of his narrow eyes were a fine smattering of delicate lines that only served to lend him an inexpressible charm.

Yan Wushi stood with his hands clasped behind him. At the sight of Shen Qiao's pale face, like a lamp that had run out of oil, he clicked his tongue. "Even though you parted ways with Chen Gong for his own safety, in the end your good intentions were met with betrayal. That Chen lad didn't want to end up Mu Tipo's exclusive property, and so he sold you out. Well? How does it feel, playing the good guy?"

Shen Qiao's chest was boiling over with nausea. He covered his mouth, sorely wishing to cough up more giant mouthfuls of blood. Maybe that would bring him relief.

"You're wrong. That night at Chuyun Temple, I was the one who read the scroll. And I'm the one who's literate, not Chen Gong. Even if he had an extraordinary memory, good enough to memorize every line, he'd only know the words, not their meaning. If the Liuhe Guild wanted to seek us out, they'd only target me. I parted ways with him so I wouldn't get him tangled in my problems. If he met some misfortune because of me, my conscience wouldn't be able to bear it."

After this long speech, his strength was flagging, forcing him to pause. He gasped down a couple of breaths, then continued.

"I can't predict the future—I couldn't have known he'd encounter Mu Tipo, and couldn't have known that he'd bring trouble to my door in order to save himself. But even if I had known, I couldn't take it out on him. Not with a clean conscience."

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Chapter 15:
Meeting Yan Wushi Again

YAN WUSHI was so angry he had to laugh. "Sect Leader Shen's heart is truly as vast as the ocean! It's a pity that not everyone on your Xuandu Mountain feels the same. Otherwise, how could they allow Kunye to knock the great Qi Fengge's disciple off a cliff?"

Shen Qiao shook his head but didn't speak.

His memory was now blurry and fragmented—he could remember some things but not others. As he was unclear on the details of the fight and his fall, there wasn't much he could say.

But Yan Wushi, without warning, lifted his palm and struck at him.

It wasn't the light strike of a child's play attack. It was solid, using a third of his martial power.

Given the gulf between their current strength, forget three-tenths of Yan Wushi's power, even one-tenth would leave Shen Qiao helpless to withstand it.

Anyone watching would think Yan Wushi was trying to kill him and that Shen Qiao had no chance of escape.

Shen Qiao's breathing became ragged, and a glob of blood surged to the back of his throat, but he forcefully held it down. Yan Wushi's true qi was just like him: it raged towards him like the fierce and unyielding flow of a river, almost substantial in its might.

And in the midst of this desperate moment, with his life hanging in the balance, his heart actually calmed and an exquisite, weightless feeling came over him.

The same darkness remained behind Shen Qiao's eyes, but beyond that darkness, a massive and sweeping river of stars burst into existence.

The universe is fathomless; the heavens and earth vast. From time immemorial, the course of nature has run eternal, and amidst all this, human beings are impossibly small. If I wish to become one with heaven,

ascending to godhood and returning to the void, then the rivers and mountains, the sun and moon, the heavens, the clouds, all of them would be me. There'd be no boundaries between all that exists in the world, and me.

That was what Shen Qiao felt in that moment.

He couldn't tell if it was his fragmented memories revealing themselves, or if reading the *Zhuyang Strategy* scroll had left it deeply engraved upon his heart. Along with the familiar words that floated to the surface of his mind, within his heart was a phenomenon like moonlight seeping through leaves, like a faint glow blooming into radiance—ethereally, flawlessly clear.

The true qi, long stagnant and lost, began to trickle faintly through his limbs and bones: delicate, boundless, and unending.

Yan Wushi's palm strike crashed down heavy as a mountain and swift as a whirling gale. No ordinary person could follow it with the naked eye, but Shen Qiao saw everything clearly. Behind him was the wall—there was nowhere to dodge. So, he chose to meet it head-on.

With his frail and sickly body, he stood against three-tenths of Yan Wushi's strength.

Yan Wushi had fought both Qi Fengge and Cui Youwang to a standstill, and they were the world's top martial artists and the grandmasters of their generation. Needless to say, he was terrifyingly strong. Forget about Shen Qiao, even Murong Qin, the Emperor of Qi's number one expert, would be on shaky ground if he faced three-tenths of Yan Wushi's strength.

And yet, Shen Qiao managed to withstand him.

He wasn't smashed flat against the wall, and he didn't cough up blood and die.

His face was so pale it was almost transparent, but his feet moved not even half an inch. The sleeves of his robe billowed high from the impact of qi, and even the ribbon on his head came undone, his hair scattering down as it fluttered wildly.

The blasts of qi met, one strong and one weak, but for a moment, the weaker one held.

Yan Wushi raised his eyebrows just a bit, but he showed little surprise. Instead, his expression said that he'd expected this.

Xuandu Mountain's cultivation methods focus on spiritual stillness and non-interference, on standing aloof from worldly affairs. Meet what's strong with strength, and what's soft with softness. Once the union is flawless and complete, the will of heaven shall become as clear as water.

The words flashed swiftly through Shen Qiao's mind.

But then he realized that his potential being released had little to do with Xuandu Mountain, and more to do with the fact that…

The true qi he was emitting showed faint signs of intermingling with Yan Wushi's. As the two billows of true qi confronted each other, they also influenced each other. It was evident that they shared a common source.

But ultimately, the difference in strength was too vast. Yan Wushi barely needed to push any harder—only a drop more pressure, and Shen Qiao was completely unable to withstand it. His complexion turned yellow, and blood spurted from his mouth again.

But just then, Yan Wushi withdrew his hand.

"So, it's true." Keenly interested, he said, "I've suspected it since I felt your pulse. You've already cultivated using the *Zhuyang Strategy* scroll at Xuandu Mountain. Qi Fengge passed it down to you, didn't he?"

Shen Qiao could only hear a buzzing in his ears. Yan Wushi's voice seemed to come from across a great distance, beyond the endless horizon. He slid down the wall, falling to the ground in a heap. "So that night at Chuyun Temple," he said, "you deliberately made me recite the scroll?"

"Indeed," said Yan Wushi. "The *Zhuyang Strategy* is composed of five volumes. The Volume of Lost Soul is at Xuandu Mountain, and since you're Qi Fengge's successor, you must have cultivated with it. Otherwise, you'd be lucky simply surviving your fall from Banbu Peak—your body wouldn't have retained a speck of vitality, let alone allowed you to gradually recover your vision and martial arts. Didn't you think it extraordinary?

"Your body remembers the *Zhuyang Strategy* you trained with, even though you lack the memory of it for the moment. That thread of true qi

remains a part of you, and it's slowly helping you recuperate. That night I made you recite the Volume of Deluded Thought because I wanted to use it to stimulate your memories. I wanted to see whether you could combine that scroll and the one you'd already trained with and integrate the contents of both volumes."

Shen Qiao had only a wisp of breath within him. "This humble Shen is only a cripple. Why would Sect Leader Yan spend so much effort on me?"

Yan Wushi smiled slyly. "The appearance of the Volume of Deluded Thought drew many factions out to fight for it. But sadly, I destroyed the original at Chuyun Temple, so only those who were present could hear it. Once they return to their sects, they inevitably must write down what they heard. And, in order to confound others, they're also certain to mix in some falsehoods and release a few extra versions. All factions will fight over them. There are many sects that couldn't make it there that night, and once they hear the news, how can they not act? They'll employ every possible method and scheme to get their hands on a real copy of the scroll. And so there will rise conflict after conflict, both hidden and overt. Don't you find it incredibly interesting?"

Shen Qiao closed his eyes. "How does this benefit you?"

"Of course there are benefits," said Yan Wushi. "But they have nothing to do with you, so you needn't worry. All you need to know is that you've also greatly benefited from this incident. After all, in this world, anyone who can get a glimpse of any volume is already enormously fortunate. There are very few who come by multiple volumes like you have. Continue your training, and it might be possible to return to your old level. So, shouldn't you show me some gratitude?"

"Sect Leader Yan…"

Yan Wushi gripped Shen Qiao's chin and forced him to raise his head. "Didn't you call me Shizun before? Why such a quick change?"

"I want…" Shen Qiao murmured, his words somewhat slurred.

Yan Wushi bent forward a little, lowering his head to listen.

Without warning, Shen Qiao spat out another large mouthful of blood. Yan Wushi had no time to let go, and blood splattered all over his

hand.

Murderous intent poured from Yan Wushi's eyes.

"I already said that I want to cough up blood," Shen Qiao said weakly. "It wasn't on purpose…"

He'd yet to finish his words when he collapsed sideways, unconscious.

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In his daze, he felt like he was floating in midair, swaying and drifting. Even his mind had drifted off, far away, and he didn't know how much time passed before it fluttered back, settling inside his body once more.

As he opened his eyes, Shen Qiao heard someone sigh from beside him. "How difficult life is! Why are you still alive? Isn't it agonizing for you, that you can never manage to die?"

It was Yan Wushi's voice.

Shen Qiao didn't reply. He felt that there was definitely something wrong with this man.

Yan Wushi already did whatever he pleased and was singularly unreasonable. Like what he'd done to the *Zhuyang Strategy*'s Volume of Deluded Thought—a priceless secret manual, and he'd destroyed it just like that. He didn't even leave himself a way out of it.

People everywhere would kill for a glimpse of that scroll but would never get it. And yet Yan Wushi had given Shen Qiao the opportunity to read it, just like that.

When he'd been met with Chen Gong's betrayal, when he'd faced Mu Tipo surrounding him with his men, Yan Wushi must have been nearby. Yet he'd stood by and watched, making no move to intervene. Only after Shen Qiao had saved himself did Yan Wushi turn up, and then only to lash out like he was trying to kill him. Which, it turned out, was to stimulate the true qi from the *Zhuyang Strategy* that was still in Shen Qiao's body.

But Shen Qiao was by no means self-absorbed enough to believe that Yan Wushi held him in any high regard, enough to painstakingly train Shen Qiao. He told himself that it was simply a manifestation of the man's erratic, mercurial personality, and hence it was too hard to reason anything about him.

"Mu Tipo's attendants have come to look for him, and Chen Gong is with them. He put you square in the sights of a sycophant like Mu Tipo. It's not too late to kill him, you know."

Shen Qiao shook his head without speaking, then slowly propped himself up into a sitting position on the bed with his elbows. As he did, he discovered that coughing up all those mouthfuls of blood had actually left his chest much relieved—the dull pain was gone. He must have managed, by some lucky fluke, to cough up the stagnant blood from inside him, and it'd helped to heal his injuries.

"Thank you, Sect Leader Yan," he said.

Yan Wushi was very frank. "I didn't expect that you'd spit out the stagnant blood either. I only wanted to force you to use the *Zhuyang Strategy*'s true qi."

Shen Qiao heard the implication behind his words: If you hadn't survived, you'd have died in vain.

"Then what does Sect Leader Yan plan to do next?"

"I'll go with you to Xuandu Mountain."

Shen Qiao was silent for a moment. The corner of his mouth twitched. "Sect Leader Yan has a myriad of affairs to attend to every day. Why would you waste your precious time on someone like me?"

Yan Wushi stroked his face in an imitation of love, as if Shen Qiao were a child. He had no way to stop him and could only let Yan Wushi grip his chin and look him up and down like a piece of personal property. "Your sect has the *Zhuyang Strategy*'s Volume of Lost Soul tucked away somewhere. Xuandu Mountain is so large—even though nobody there is my match, searching for it would be such a bother. Wouldn't you being with me make things simpler?"

“You wish for me to recall the contents of the scroll and write it down for you?”

Yan Wushi smiled contemptuously. “Only the mediocre need to read the text and write it down word by word. I’ve already cultivated with the scroll in the inner palace of Northern Zhou, and I’ve seen the Volume of Deluded Thought. With two of the five, I’ve already grasped the essence of the *Zhuyang Strategy*. Rather than read something you’ve written down, which could very well be lies, I can just fight you directly. That way, I’ll be able to decipher the mysteries of the scroll that’s hidden at Xuandu Mountain.”

He said to Shen Qiao, “The true Xiantian state lies not in a person’s form, much less in mimicking them. Each path is forged by a human being. Tao Hongjing was able to combine the strengths of the three schools of thought, so of course I can create martial arts that go beyond his.”

He sounded ridiculously arrogant, insufferably so, but on closer contemplation, Shen Qiao actually agreed with him.

It was down to his own principles that Yan Wushi was able to become the leader of a sect, and his martial prowess was such that he could live as he pleased. Given all that, he was indeed worthy of becoming a grandmaster who could stand at the summit of the world.

There was only one issue: there was no pleasure in interacting with this man on a daily basis, from dawn to dusk. It was absolute torture.

Yan Wushi released him. “Since you’re awake now, we’ll head out tomorrow,” he said indifferently.

“Do I have a choice?” asked Shen Qiao helplessly.

“You can choose to walk out on your own while you’re still relatively unwounded, or we can fight another round. Then I’ll take you with me after I injure and cripple you.”

Shen Qiao had nothing to say to this.

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Chapter 16:
Good and Evil

OF COURSE, with Yan Wushi around, there was no need to take the safer main roads. To save time, Yan Wushi didn't pass through Chang'an but instead went directly south to Luo Province, then on to Yu Province and Sui Province from there.

This route drastically shortened the distance of their journey, but at the same time it led them through some less-than-peaceful areas, since they were close to the Qi-Zhou border. After the disastrous drought of the previous year, when parched land stretched for thousands of kilometers, refugees were everywhere, and they were all flocking to the surrounding provinces and counties where food and vegetation was more plentiful. Even now, Shen Qiao and Yan Wushi still saw many displaced, wandering people along their journey.

Few people in the world today could match Yan Wushi when it came to martial arts, but he made for an awfully poor travel companion. Shen Qiao had yet to recover from his injuries—his eyes were sometimes good, sometimes bad, and had never returned to normal. At most it was like before, where he could vaguely see smudges of light and shadow. Yan Wushi showed him no gentleness on account of this, nor did he offer him special accommodation. As Yan Wushi didn't need a carriage, he didn't rent one. Instead, he walked on ahead of Shen Qiao at a steady pace, his manner practically shouting, "Keep up if you can. And you'd better keep going if you can't."

And so, they traveled, one in front and one at the back, for several days. Just outside Xiang Province's city, they encountered another group of refugees.

These people were originally from Guang Province. Because of the famine there, they'd been forced to trek vast distances to the more affluent Xiang Province. But the governor of Xiang Province had refused to open the city gates for them and ordered his soldiers to keep a strict guard, forbidding them from letting a single one inside.

The refugees lacked the strength to try their luck anywhere else, so all they could do was station themselves there outside the city. For all practical purposes, they were waiting for their slow deaths to overtake them.

From the perspective of the imperial administration, one couldn't blame the governors for acting as they did. A city's food was limited. If they let the refugees in, they'd be responsible for arranging space for them, even though they were officially someone else's citizens. It'd add more stress to Xiang Province itself, and if a time came when Xiang Province didn't have enough food, the locals would suffer too. The Emperor of Qi, Gao Wei, was busy with his pursuit of hedonism, completely unwilling to manage the affairs of state. Before the food the court distributed to the provinces even made it to them, it'd already been embezzled away. Not to mention, if the governor of Xiang Province did let these refugees into the city, they'd get no appreciation for it from the court.

Xiang Province was quite close to Xuandu Mountain. With a few more days of southwestward travel, they'd reach that mountain, which stood just next to Mian Province.

The closer they got to Xuandu Mountain, the better Yan Wushi's mood became.

It became so good, in fact, that he slowed his pace and waited for Shen Qiao to catch up. He was even in the mood to point out the local customs and culture to him. If someone didn't know any better, they might have thought they were two long-time friends traveling together.

He said to Shen Qiao, "During the Warring States period, Xiang Province belonged to Chu, so Chu influence is strong here. The land is also rich and populous—a pity that Gao Wei does not care to manage it. Generations of the Gao family's hard work will likely be lost at his hands."

Yan Wushi obviously had not the slightest respect for the Emperor of Qi. He'd called him by his name straight off the bat.

Shen Qiao squinted and saw the blurry figures of many people gathered outside the city. Children and women, both young and old, made up the majority. Their one bit of good fortune was that the weather wasn't too hot, otherwise a rampant plague would have probably arisen in such an

encampment. He shook his head helplessly and sighed. “The common people live such difficult lives!”

Unmoved, Yan Wushi replied, “Truth be told, this kind of scene plays out in other countries as well. Since the Uprising of the Five Barbarians at the end of the Western Jin Dynasty, all sorts of factions have competed for authority, and countless lives were lost while they did it. This kind of famine happened every year, especially on the borders. Each country tried to transfer their problems to someone else, to absolve themselves of the responsibility, and they eagerly pushed their refugees onto other countries. When the plentiful years arrived, they’d just launch another war to annex the cities of neighboring countries. Mutinies were common and regimes changed at every turn. No one puts any real thought into state administration, since the countries change hands and names every few years. Northern Qi is just a more aggravated case.”

“But I heard that Sect Leader Yan maintains another identity as a high-ranking official and that the Emperor of Zhou relies on you heavily. I suppose that in your mind, you believe that Northern Zhou has the best chance of unifying the lands?”

Yan Wushi shrugged. “Enlightened or not, emperors are all the same,” he said lazily. “The only difference is that some are able to curb their desires, while others aren’t, or they don’t wish to. Yuwen Yong is hawkish and quick to kill, but he prohibits Buddhism and Daoism, and also dislikes Confucianism. As he isn’t inclined to favor any particular side, he’s left with very few choices, and since I wish to unify the three demonic sects, I’ll need his assistance. The Yuwen family has been in the Central Plains for many years—although their ancestors were Xianbei people, they’ve long acculturated to the Han. The methods and systems of Zhou are all the same as the Han ones. So, if a Yuwen became emperor of a united land, they probably wouldn’t do any worse than Southern Chen.”

After journeying for a great many days and hearing about a great many things, Shen Qiao had gained a general understanding of the workings of the world as well.

Buddhist Master Xueting, who’d intervened to stop Yan Wushi that night at Chuyun Temple, was once a supporter of Northern Zhou. However,

he'd supported the old regent Yuwen Hu, not the current emperor, Yuwen Yong.

Buddhist Master Xueting came from Tiantai Sect and was the martial brother of Fayi, Tiantai Sect's current leader. But Tiantai Sect itself favored Southern Chen, so the whole matter was wrapped up in the sect's internal feuds. It was a lengthy tale of its own.

Yuwen Yong had to untangle the state from its relationships with the Buddhist sects after he seized back his stolen power—especially if he wanted to eliminate Yuwen Hu's remaining influence. And so, nowadays, the Xueting line occupied something of an awkward position within Northern Zhou. Although it hadn't lost its status completely, Buddhist Master Xueting would never be able to restore their former glory as long as Yuwen Yong was in power.

In Yuwen Yong's eyes, the three schools of thought had their own ambitions. If he became involved with any one ideology, then his style of governance would inevitably be colored by them. As an emperor with a strong sense of autonomy, he rankled at the thought. In contrast, although Huanyue Sect also had their own goals, they were clearly more suited to cooperation than the other sects, and they wouldn't ask Yuwen Yong to promote a certain doctrine or try to sway his thinking.

As Yan Wushi and Shen Qiao conversed, they walked on towards the city gates.

When ordinary people or merchants were entering the city, they'd often need to travel as a group to ward off harassment from the refugees, and it went best if there was a male guard with them. This was because the refugees, driven into a corner by starvation, could turn to banditry and stealing from others by force. If beautiful women or children fell into the hands of bandits, not only would their virginity be in danger, they might also end up in a stew pot.

With all this going on around them, Yan Wushi and Shen Qiao together made for a rather peculiar and eye-catching combination.

One was empty-handed and carried nothing, while the other leaned on a bamboo cane, looking frail and like a man recovering from a serious illness. They certainly did not seem like ordinary travelers.

From time to time, the roadside vagrants would go up to them and beg. But a glance was enough to tell that Yan Wushi wasn't to be trifled with. They avoided him out of fear and turned instead to Shen Qiao, who looked meek and more easily persuaded.

One group was a husband and wife dragging three or four children behind them up the road. They were skeletal and barely looked human any longer, more like puppets or zombies. Even their expressions were wooden. The oldest child couldn't be more than six or seven years old, while the youngest was only two or three. The last one hobbled and stumbled along since her parents lacked the strength to carry her. Clutching a corner of her mother's robe, she followed them, staggering.

If things went on like this, the girl would end up exchanged for the child of another family to earn her parents a mouthful of food, or she'd be cooked and eaten by her parents themselves. People were pushed to the brink in such troubled times, and even the concerns of blood and family could be set aside for the sake of survival.

When the husband and wife saw Shen Qiao walk past, they fell to their knees and begged him for food. Shen Qiao thought for a moment, then fished out a portion of wrapped flatbread from his lapels and gave it to the youngest child.

The couple were overjoyed and thanked him again and again. Then the husband snatched the bread from the child's hands and immediately took a huge bite. When he saw his wife and children staring at him, he hesitated for a long while before reluctantly breaking off a small piece and offering it to his wife.

The wife took the small piece of flatbread but didn't eat it herself. Instead, she carefully broke it into several precious pieces and divided them among the children.

The flatbread wasn't large, and they soon wolfed it down in a couple of bites. The nearby refugees watched them with covetous eyes, which they turned to glare ferociously at Shen Qiao.

The husband begged Shen Qiao, "The children have been hungry for days, please, Your Excellency, give them another flatbread so that they can hold on until we get into the city!"

But Shen Qiao refused. “I’m not a wealthy man either. I only had two flatbreads with me. I’ve given you one, but I must also keep one for myself.”

When the husband heard that Shen Qiao still had food on him, his expression immediately changed. Seeing Shen Qiao’s dull-eyed gaze, and how he relied on a bamboo cane for support, his thoughts took an ugly turn. He lunged for Shen Qiao.

But before he could even touch his sleeve, he’d already been sent flying in the opposite direction. He landed heavily on the ground with a wretched scream.

Despite this, Shen Qiao still looked as sickly and frail as he’d always been. Looking at him, it was impossible to tell that he’d just sent a man flying.

Of course, Shen Qiao hadn’t expected his moment of kindness to end up this way. He looked at the man’s wife and children again—they’d all huddled together, clutching each other in terror.

When the other covetous refugees who’d been watching eagerly saw this scene play out, they became too afraid to try anything.

The husband crawled upright arduously, but instead of begging for mercy, he cursed at Shen Qiao. “Well, go on, kill me! People like you are the biggest hypocrites! Handing out alms just so you can relish our kowtows and thanks. If you’re going to help someone, why not save them completely? You clearly still have a flatbread, so why not take it out? If you didn’t want to give that to us, then don’t give us anything! Instead, you gave us one taste of relief, but nothing more, nothing filling. You might as well just kill us!”

Shen Qiao sighed and shook his head. He said nothing, only turned and left.

The entire time, Yan Wushi was standing a short distance away, hands clasped behind his back. He neither intervened nor moved on. It was as if he’d simply waited for Shen Qiao, but with the shadow of a smile on his face.

Now, of course, everyone knew he had food on him, but all they could do was watch as he left.

Yan Wushi waited until he was close before saying, “Have you ever heard the saying: ‘a cup full of rice begets gratitude, while a cart full of rice begets resentment?”

Shen Qiao sighed. “I was too rash. There are so many suffering; it’s impossible to save them all myself.”

“A father didn’t even care whether his children lived or died, yet you stepped in and did his job for him. Sect Leader Shen really does possess a benevolent heart full of love,” Yan Wushi ridiculed him. “It’s just a pity that human greed knows no bounds and can’t fathom your good intentions. If you hadn’t been able to defend yourself today, you’d probably have ended up as stew by now.”

Shen Qiao considered his words seriously. “If I couldn’t defend myself, I wouldn’t have taken this road. I’d have chosen a longer route to avoid places where refugees gathered. It’s human nature to seek benefits and avoid harm. I am neither a saint nor an exception. But when someone is suffering right in front of me, I can’t bear to stand by and watch.”

He clung stubbornly to goodness, but Yan Wushi believed that it was human nature to do evil. On a fundamental level, they had no common ground. Yan Wushi could doubtlessly kill Shen Qiao with his martial arts, but even choking Shen Qiao wouldn’t get him to change his point of view.

After this little interlude, the slight easing in the atmosphere between them vanished completely.

“Sir!”

The voice was small, weak, and came from behind them.

Shen Qiao turned and saw a blurred silhouette: short and skinny, likely a child.

The child ran to him and knelt down, then kowtowed to him three times with the utmost seriousness. “Thanks, sir, for giving us the bread. Father was rude to you, but I… All I can do’s kowtow to you and ask for your great forgiveness. Please don’t hold it against him!”

Of course Shen Qiao wouldn’t hold any grudge when a child was involved. He sighed and helped him stand up. “I didn’t take it to heart. I’ve heard that Buddha’s birthday is soon—the people of Xiang Province are

Buddhist, so the temples will set up facilities and hand out congee. They'll allow some refugees inside the city then. There's still a chance you'll survive."

The child's eyes shone, and he thanked Shen Qiao repeatedly. "Thanks for telling me, sir. What's this gentleman's honored name? When I've got the chance, this lowly one'll repay his debts and set up a longevity tablet[37] for you for sure!"

Shen Qiao patted his head warmly. "That isn't necessary," he said. "Just take good care of your mother and younger siblings."

The child nodded vigorously. Then he whispered, "Don't worry! I didn't eat the flatbread Mother gave me. I snuck it to my sister!"

When Shen Qiao heard this, he sighed to himself. His heart ached at the child's maturity. After a moment, he pulled out the remaining flatbread from his lapels and handed it to the young boy. "Take this back and eat it. Don't let your father find out again."

The child, so hungry that he was jaundiced and emaciated, somehow managed to find the strength to absolutely refuse the flatbread. In the end, Shen Qiao had to force it into his hand. "If you keep pushing it away, everyone else will see," he said. "Then there'll be trouble again."

Only then did the child accept it. Once again, he kneeled and kowtowed to Shen Qiao. "Please won't this gentleman tell me his name?" he insisted.

"My name is Shen Qiao."

"Shen Qiao…" That child mulled it over several times. Perhaps he'd taken the Qiao as another Qiao with a different meaning, though it was impossible to know. Shen Qiao said nothing to correct him.

The child left, looking back three times with each step he took.

"It's late," said Yan Wushi. "Let's hurry up and enter the city."

Shen Qiao had noticed how he made no mocking remarks this time and found it odd. "You're not going to say anything?"

"Some people just like doing stupid things," Yan Wushi said coolly. "Even if you chide them, they won't listen. Why should this venerable one waste his breath?"

Shen Qiao rubbed his nose and smiled, saying nothing.

There was indeed much malice in the world, but he refused to let that quash his belief in kindness and benevolence.

He felt the flatbread had been well worth the exchange for that little shred of goodwill.

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Chapter 17:
Old Friends' Reunion

AT THE FOOT of Xuandu Mountain was Xuandu Town, which had been a peaceful little town for many years. Being located right next to a world-famous Daoist sect meant little to the townspeople. At most, they treated the Daoist priests who came down the mountain with extra courtesy and respect.

When the residents of Xuandu Mountain would occasionally leave the mountain for purchases, as the dignified, number one Daoist sect in the world, of course they'd always pay according to the full market prices. They dealt fairly, and they never used their influence as a great sect to push around the common people. And so, for all these years, the people of Xuandu Town had always been proud to be neighbors with the Daoist priests from Xuandu's Violet Palace.

But that was all. For a Daoist sect was, after all, a Daoist sect—once you took up the path of Xuandu, you became a person detached from the mundane realm. Their lives were a world apart from the lives of the common folk below the mountain, who rose to work with dawn and went to rest at dusk.

But when Shen Qiao and Yan Wushi arrived at Xuandu Town, the place was livelier than usual: people came and went, and among them were many martial artists, as well as more than a few in Daoist dress.

"Ten days from now, Xuandu's Violet Palace will hold a Jade Terrace Discussion," said Yan Wushi. "There they'll determine the path the orthodoxy should take, and they've invited sages and scholars from all over to join the event. It's said that all the major sects have sent people—even envoys from Linchuan Academy and Tiantai Sect will come."

"What does it mean to determine the path the orthodoxy should take?" asked Shen Qiao.

Just then, the two of them were sitting in a teahouse and looking outside.

Yan Wushi took a sip of tea. “In your absence, Xuandu Mountain must have someone in charge. As long as that person’s identity isn’t announced to the public, no one will know who he is. He’ll find a reason to show himself eventually. When you were sect leader, you kept such a low profile that no one could even recognize you. But that doesn’t mean that everyone else will be the same, no?”

Shen Qiao had long ago become accustomed to Yan Wushi’s style of speech and its ever-present hint of sarcasm.

Given Yan Wushi’s status and position, there were indeed very few people who could catch his eye. On Xuandu Mountain, nobody had been worthy of his proper attention since the deceased Qi Fengge.

He might have been quarrelsome, but the man he’d been matched with was so outstandingly good-natured, his temper so difficult to arouse, even picking a fight became rather difficult to do. So, their relationship became something not quite enemies but also not quite friends, and on the long journey together, they’d managed to achieve a delicate kind of balance.

“What’s happening down there?” Shen Qiao’s attention was drawn by something nearby, downstairs. He squinted but still couldn’t quite make it out. It hadn’t yet been long enough for his eyes to fully recover. In broad daylight, right under the sun, he couldn’t keep them open too long without tears streaming down his face.

“Giving out congee and medicine to the poor.” Of course, Yan Wushi didn’t have the power of foresight, but when he wanted to know something, someone informed him of it well ahead of time.

He picked up a piece of osmanthus-flavored candied lotus with his chopsticks, then popped it into his mouth. “After Yu Ai took over as Acting Sect Leader, he started sending the disciples to Xuandu Town on the first and fifteenth of every month,” he said casually. “They set up an altar and preach Daoist doctrines. I’ve heard that the rain prayers from the disciples of Xuandu’s Violet Palace are very effective. Nowadays, if quite a while goes by without rain, the governor of Mian Province will send people up the mountain to ask them to come down and pray for rain. And so, Xuandu Mountain gains more and more followers. In Xuandu Town alone, something like eight or nine people out of ten greatly revere Xuandu’s Violet Palace.”

Yan Wushi looked like he was watching a good show, but Shen Qiao's frown grew deeper and deeper.

"You've remembered everything," said Yan Wushi.

It wasn't a question but a statement of affirmation.

Although his body was still somewhat sickly and weak, ever since Shen Qiao spat out the stagnant blood that had been in his chest, the bewilderment on his face had faded with each passing day. Recovering his memories had only been a matter of time.

Yan Wushi had noticed, but he hadn't pressed Shen Qiao about it, because he didn't know exactly how much he remembered. From the look of him now, he'd probably recovered nearly all his memories.

Shen Qiao sighed and didn't deny it. "For several generations, the sect leaders of Xuandu Mountain have flatly refused to involve themselves in worldly affairs. No matter now the dynasties changed, it remained as stable as it's always been. Tao Hongjing was the number one martial artist in the world and a man of great genius. Yet, because he'd involved himself in politics, Mount Mao's Shangqing Sect fell apart after his death, and their disciples scattered. What does Yu Ai think he's doing here?"

Yan Wushi raised an eyebrow. "Is that what Qi Fengge taught you? To cower in your shell like a turtle? If he was all alone, then it'd be fine to only focus on his own moral purity and give no thought to others, but he was the leader of a sect. And yet, he didn't want to advance. He spent all day just thinking about how his sect had to remain hidden from the world and not interfere. If it went on like that, could Xuandu Mountain really hold onto its position as the number one Daoist sect? I find that little Acting Sect Leader of yours much clearer minded than you."

Xuandu Mountain had maintained its reputation and status as the world's number one Daoist sect for several generations, and successive sect leaders had espoused the Daoist principles of spiritual stillness and non-interference. They were bent on avoiding the world for all time and absolutely refused to involve themselves with its state of affairs. Qi Fengge, who'd held the undisputed crown when it came to martial arts, was no exception.

Later, when Shen Qiao had taken over as sect leader, he'd taken this idea of keeping a low profile to the extreme. The world only ever learned that Xuandu Mountain had a new sect leader, that his surname was Shen, and nearly nothing else. And so even though Shen Qiao was running about everywhere with Yan Wushi, almost no one had recognized him.

Yan Wushi was ostentatious and egotistical by nature—he always did as he pleased. Naturally, he had nothing but contempt for Xuandu Mountain's way of doing things.

Shen Qiao didn't get angry at his words. He only said, "Tonight, I wish to find a chance to head up the mountain and speak with Yu Ai personally. Would Sect Leader Yan like to come with me or wait for me here at the foot of the mountain?"

"Why not wait until the Jade Terrace Discussion to reveal yourself and cross-examine Yu Ai in front everyone? Why not take back your rightful position as sect leader?"

"If I do that, Xuandu Mountain's reputation would suffer a great blow." Shen Qiao shook his head. "I fear that there's more to this matter than meets the eye. To get to the bottom of things, I must first ask Yu Ai."

Yan Wushi didn't care one way or the other. "Ah well, then go ask."

With their prestigious title of "number one Daoist sect," Xuandu Mountain received few people with the gall to come barging in on their own. But Yan Wushi said it like he was ordering an extra bowl of rice—offhand, because he may as well.

His expression utterly unconcerned, he stroked the edge of a plate. The dish of disordered, scattered fried green beans promptly stacked themselves into three neat layers. Every layer even had the exact same number of green beans. This was a technique using true qi to manipulate objects across space, and he'd already perfected it to a terrifying degree.

The Demon Lord's reemergence in the jianghu was only widely known because of his duel with Kunye. And it was only because Kunye had recently defeated Shen Qiao that the rumors painted Yan Wushi as practically divine. In reality, there were very few people who had firsthand knowledge of his present martial prowess.

If someone saw him using his martial arts—which could easily take off a man's head—to stack a bunch of fried green beans, who knew what they'd think.

"You're at less than a third of your peak strength. Can you make it up there by yourself?" Yan Wushi asked.

"There's a path along the cliff by the back mountain," said Shen Qiao. "The terrain there is steep, and there are no guards. There's an array formation working as a barrier, and outsiders know nothing of its inner workings, so if they charge up the path, they'll just get dizzy and turned around. They could even fall from the cliff. Their martial prowess might not save them, no matter how strong they are."

At first, Yan Wushi had been indifferent and had only asked about the excursion for his own amusement. But when he heard this, he became a little interested after all. "Then I must go and see it for myself."

***

Night fell. The lively Xuandu Town calmed down, drifting into dreams beneath a sky full of stars.

Shen Qiao took a route up the mountain that seemed completely without rhyme or reason: sometimes it was tortuous and winding, sometimes it deliberately avoided an easy walk up the stone steps and opted for a steep nearby slope instead. But there was a purpose: the stone path and the foliage were integrated into an invisible formation array—nine out of ten times, the ignorant would fall into the trap. Even if they weren't ensnared, they'd activate the alarm, alerting the Xuandu Mountain disciples.

Yan Wushi had no interest in Shen Qiao and Yu Ai's conversation or the internal feuds within Xuandu Mountain. He was more taken by the formations concealed on this path. He trailed far behind Shen Qiao, carefully observing where he trod and pondering it thoroughly, which brought him its own sort of pleasure.

After walking in this manner for about an hour—thanks to Shen Qiao having recovered three-tenths of his strength at this point—they were able to reach the mountain summit in quite good time.

The peaks of Xuandu Mountain stretched tall, and the summit was much colder than its foot. Quite a few Daoist halls and monasteries were visible, standing in tiers with white mist swirling about. It was cold and lonely, but it truly did have that Daoist sense of transcendence, of detachment from the mundane.

Shen Qiao had grown up here, and he'd long ago become accustomed to this kind of scenery. Seeing it again now, he couldn't feel the slightest nostalgia, nor affection. Instead, it settled in his chest like a stone, and he ached to release it with a sigh.

But he had no time to sigh. Making use of the forest cover, he took a shortcut and ran straight up to a two-tiered building.

Before nearing it, he stopped, squinting far into the distance, a little surprised.

It was called Yuxu Pavilion and was the residence of successive generations of sect leaders. It had been Shen Qiao's residence too.

After he fell from the cliff, Yu Ai took over Xuandu Mountain and became the acting sect leader. Xuandu Mountain's recent high-profile deeds seemed to make clear Yu Ai's ambitions and aspirations, so Shen Qiao had been sure he'd move into Yuxu Pavilion.

But when looking at it now, he saw that the gates and windows of the monastery were tightly shut, and there was no candle flame within. It seemed like no one had taken up residence.

Could it be that Yu Ai wanted to wait until the Jade Terrace Discussion? Did he want to make his title official before moving in?

Shen Qiao mused over this for a moment. Since there was no one in Yuxu Pavilion, then he'd have to go to Yu Ai's old place of residence and take a look.

This thought had just formed when he saw the cloaked silhouette of a person carrying a candle, walking in the distance towards Yuxu Pavilion.

The silhouette's figure was familiar, but Shen Qiao's eyesight remained poor, and he couldn't be certain. Only after frowning and staring at it for a long moment did he conclude that the man was likely his shidi, Yu Ai.

Although it was a cold and clear night, all the nearby buildings were meant to support the sect leader's ascetic training,[38] so nobody wandered in among them unless their duties called for it. There was even a formation array protecting the area, so ordinary disciples couldn't enter. All this made it easy for Shen Qiao to get around.

After thinking it over, he decided to move in closer and get a handle on the situation first.

Lit by candlelight, Yu Ai entered the Yuxu Pavilion. Through a window, Shen Qiao watched as a room on the second floor was swiftly and faintly illuminated.

It was exactly the room he'd once lived in.

But Shen Qiao had overestimated his ability, and underestimated Yu Ai's. He'd only crept a little closer when a voice rang out, "Which friend comes here uninvited?"

This voice drifted over the distance from the direction of the Yuxu Pavilion and seemed to burst in Shen Qiao's ears. His ears buzzed, and a muffled pain woke in his chest. Shen Qiao had to retreat three steps. He knew the effects were brought on by Yu Ai infusing his voice with internal energy.

"It's me, Yu-shidi," he said, after steadying himself.

He knew Yu Ai could hear him.

Sure enough, there came a faint sound from within the Yuxu Pavilion, and in the next moment a silhouette appeared before him.

"Zhangjiao-shixiong?"[39]

There was surprise in his voice, but also something Shen Qiao hadn't anticipated: joy.

By the looks of it, Yu Ai hadn't expected his reappearance, but he had been greatly wishing for it.

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Chapter 18:
A Falling-Out Between Brothers

THOUGH XUANDU MOUNTAIN was the world's number one Daoist sect, it had none of the internal feuding that outsiders would have guessed.

From the time he was a child, Shen Qiao had grown up nestled in a peaceful, stable environment.

His master was loving, both a teacher and a father to him. Shen Qiao's sect siblings regarded each other with deep fraternal affection too. Most days, they would all play around together in their free time, and even Qi Fengge wasn't as dignified or majestic in front of his disciples as outsiders might have imagined.

It was because the people around him all treated him with gentleness that Shen Qiao grew to be a gentle person.

He entered the sect at an inopportune time, so he wasn't Qi Fengge's first disciple, nor was he a beloved final disciple.

Of the five disciples Qi Fengge accepted, Shen Qiao ranked second. This should have been an awkward position to occupy, but because of his character and talent, and his tolerance and empathy when handling problems, he ended up Qi Fengge's most favored disciple. And so, in the end, the position of sect leader passed to Shen Qiao.

Yu Ai ranked third and was even two years older than him, but because he'd entered the sect later, he had to address Shen Qiao as Shixiong. As a child, he'd struggled with this for a long time. He'd often pester Shen Qiao, trying to provoke him into calling *him* Shixiong, but he never succeeded.

The two of them were close in age and had grown up playing together, so of course they were the closest to one another. If asked, Shen Qiao would say he trusted his shizun Qi Fengge and his martial siblings more than anyone else in the world.

And, if asked which of his martial siblings he was closest with, he'd probably answer that it was Yu Ai.

Before he climbed the mountain, Shen Qiao had pictured their reunion. He'd thought that perhaps Yu Ai would be astonished to see a dead man return alive—that he might even show some guilt or fear. Or maybe his face would betray his disgust. Maybe Yu Ai wouldn't even want to see him.

But he hadn't expected anything like this joyful surprise. Even though Shen Qiao couldn't see his expression, he heard no lie in his shidi's voice.

There were a lot of things he'd planned to say, and they were all on the tip of his tongue, but he didn't know where to start. Yu Ai hadn't said anything more after calling out "Zhangjiao-shixiong." Guessing that he was taking his time looking him over, Shen Qiao resorted to a rather prosaic conversation starter. "Is everything well within the sect?"

There was no answer. Shen Qiao canted his head slightly and asked, "San-shidi?"[40]

"What's wrong with your eyes?"

Yu Ai's voice was very close. Instinct told Shen Qiao to back up, but a hand had clasped around his wrist.

"What's wrong with your eyes?" Yu Ai asked again.

Shen Qiao only touched lightly on the matter with his answer. "I fell from the cliff during my duel with Kunye. When I woke up, they were like this."

The hand clutching his wrist didn't let go. "Don't move, I'll examine your pulse."

Shen Qiao wanted to tell him that there was no need, but he couldn't struggle free, so he let his shidi do as he wished.

Yu Ai took his pulse with rapt attention. After a moment, he asked, "You barely have any internal energy. What happened, exactly?"

Calmly, Shen Qiao said, "Isn't this what you expected when you poisoned me?"

For a moment, Yu Ai's hand froze, and Shen Qiao took the opportunity to pull his own away.

Yu Ai's level of martial arts was such that his eyesight wasn't hampered no matter how dark the night or how feeble the candlelight.

He looked over Shen Qiao with great focus. His shixiong's face was a chilly white, and he'd become quite a bit thinner. It was evident that he's suffered much hardship during his time outside the sect. His hand peeked out from his sleeve to hold a bamboo cane, and that hand was so scrawny and bony it made Yu Ai shudder.

"Since you've returned, don't leave us again." Yu Ai sighed. "Let me explain this slowly, all right?"

Shen Qiao shook his head. "Xuandu Mountain is about to choose a new sect leader. Won't it make things difficult for you if I'm here—an old character who's damaged Xuandu Mountain's reputation?"

Confused, Yu Ai said, "Who said Xuandu Mountain is choosing a new sect leader?"

"The Jade Terrace Discussion is ten days from now. Isn't it also a ceremony for Xuandu Mountain to announce their new sect leader?"

Yu Ai was about to shake his head, then realized that Shen Qiao wouldn't see it if he did. "Ever since you fell from the cliff and vanished, I've discreetly sent people out to search for you," he said. "They looked everywhere, time and time again, but still they couldn't find you. To be declared living, there must be a person; to be declared dead, there must be a body. As long as you're still alive, Xuandu Mountain will never change sect leaders. I'm seeing to all our affairs on your behalf, but that's only as the acting sect leader. I have no intention of overstepping my authority and replacing you."

In the past, Shen Qiao believed whatever Yu Ai said, but things had changed. Now, he simply couldn't.

He was silent for a moment. "That day, during my duel with Kunye, I discovered that more than half of my internal energy was missing and that my true qi had gone stagnant, the flow congested. I strained myself to keep going, but in the end, it was for naught. I gave it careful thought at the time, but from start to end I couldn't figure out when or where I'd been poisoned. I certainly never thought it could have been you."

Yu Ai hung his head and said nothing, but in his sleeve, his hand was trembling imperceptibly.

Yes, from childhood to adulthood, Shen Qiao had always trusted Yu Ai unconditionally. He'd trusted everyone on Xuandu Mountain.

It wasn't because Shen Qiao was foolish and ignorant, or naive and gullible, but because he'd believed in them. He'd believed that there would always be goodness in the world, believed in the people he'd known and experiences he'd had growing up, and believed that his martial siblings, inseparable as they were from himself, could never betray him. And that's why he hadn't guarded himself against them, and why he'd fallen so easily for Yu Ai's scheme.

Shen Qiao went on, "I was unconscious after falling from the cliff. When I woke up, I'd lost my memory and I spent all my days in a muddle, confused and disoriented. It was just recently that I recalled many of the details. The night before I fought Kunye, you came to me and asked if we could share a bed. There, we talked about all sorts of things, about the past. You even told me that you admired Xiao-shimei, but that, sadly, she was indifferent and cold to everyone. You were very distressed about this and told me that I was the only one you could talk to. You said you hoped that I would approach her for you after my duel with Kunye."

Yu Ai didn't respond.

"At first, when Kunye sent the challenge letter, I didn't want to accept. But then you brought up Shizun's old duel with Kunye's master, Hulugu. You said that if I didn't agree, it might do harm to both Shizun's and Xuandu Mountain's reputations. Then you started to make a show of professing your affection for Xiao-shimei whenever I was around. But the strange thing was, you never showed any hint of insuppressible yearning in front of Xiao-shimei herself, not on your face or in your words. I didn't suspect anything at the time—I even went on comforting you, and created opportunities for you to be alone with Xiao-shimei. But thinking back, none of that was real, was it?"

Yu Ai finally sighed. "No, it wasn't. I never carried a torch for Xiao-shimei. I only said that to confuse you, so that you wouldn't pay attention to other things and your guard would be down. And also, so I'd have opportunities to speak to you alone before that final battle. You inherited

Shizun's mantle, and your martial arts were the best among us martial siblings. A normal poison would be ineffective against you, so I had to use that rare and mystical poison: 'Joyful Reunion.'[41] It isn't fatal immediately, and if the dosage is properly controlled, it's completely undetectable. Over time, the poison enters the bones, and the person looks like they've died a natural death.

"But I never wanted to take your life, so I only used a tiny amount of Joyful Reunion—I only wanted you to lose the duel against Kunye. With your martial arts, I thought that even if you fell off the cliff, it wouldn't be enough to kill you. At most, I reckoned you'd only suffer some serious injuries, maybe you'd take a couple of months to recuperate. But things went wrong. After you fell, I sent people to look for you right away, but no matter how hard we looked, we couldn't find you."

Shen Qiao's frown grew even deeper. "Joyful Reunion is incredibly rare. They say it's a poison that was brought to the Central Plains back when Zhang Qian traveled through the Western Regions. Then it was lost, and there's probably not even any hidden away in the imperial palace, let alone here at Xuandu Mountain. Where exactly did you get it from?"

Without waiting for Yu Ai's answer, his expression suddenly shifted into one of surprise. "Kunye? Did you get it from Kunye?"

"…Yes," said Yu Ai.

"You colluded with the Göktürks just to keep me from being sect leader?"

Finally, a faint trace of anger broke through on Shen Qiao's face. "Shizun may have passed it on to me, but you know that I never sought out the position of sect leader. And all these years, I relied so much on you to help me with the sect's internal affairs. If you'd said just one word, I'd have happily yielded the seat to you. So, I don't understand—why did you need to go so far, even to the Göktürks?"

His heart churned with emotion; his voice was loud and harsh. After he spoke, he couldn't hold back a bout of coughing.

Yu Ai wanted to rub Shen Qiao's back and help him breathe, but as he reached out his hand, he paused. Finally, he withdrew it and said slowly, "Because Xuandu Mountain can't go on like this. Secluding ourselves and

ignoring the outside world—we may be the world's number one Daoist sect now, but eventually we'll lose that edge!

"Take a look around—in the Daoist sects, Chunyang Monastery at Qingcheng Mountain is rising to prominence, and its leader Yi Pichen is one of the world's top ten. He has an even stronger reputation than you do, Zhangjiao-shixiong. But ever since Shizun died, here at Xuandu's Violet Palace we still just cling to *his* influence.

"Once, you were as strong as Yi Pichen in martial arts. If you'd been willing to enter greater society, you could have been a contender for the spot of number one in the world. But you chose solitude. You'd rather stay in obscurity, hidden away in these mountains. If we keep on like this, then no matter how deep Xuandu Mountain's prestige runs, eventually we'll be replaced!"

At this point, Yu Ai's tone became agitated and indignant. "The world is in utter chaos right now," he said. "The Daoists erect separate denominations, while the Buddhists and Confucians are using all sorts of tricks just for the right to have their say, each lending their support to their chosen ruler for his ambitions in the Central Plains. Even the demonic sects have been meddling! Only Xuandu Mountain remains secluded and isolated, ears closed, unwilling to listen. We have the finest sword yet refuse to wield it. If some Buddhist- or Confucian-backed emperor unifies the land one day, will us Daoists still have a place left to stand?!"

His words slowed, then. "Shixiong, I've never wanted to take your place. I also know that those from different tribes will never understand each other. Working with the Göktürks is just one part of my plan. If you were here, Shixiong, you'd never allow me to do this. The only choice I had was to carry out that foolish plan, so that you'd be gone. Now that you've returned, don't leave again. Stay here and recuperate properly, all right?"

"And what will you do in ten days?" asked Shen Qiao.

Yu Ai startled. "What?"

"I've returned to Xuandu Mountain. How are you going to explain that to our martial siblings and the other disciples? And ten days later, at the Jade Terrace Discussion, how are you are going to explain it to the public?"

For a moment, Yu Ai couldn't respond.

Shen Qiao asked again, “What exactly are you working on with the Göktürks?”

“My apologies,” said Yu Ai. “I can’t tell you yet.”

“And what if I oppose your plans?”

Yu Ai said nothing.

“If I oppose you, you’ll detain me, and from then on, I’ll be a sect leader in nothing but name, barred from seeing the light of day. That way, I won’t hinder your grand plan, is that right?”

Only silence answered him.

Shen Qiao sighed. “You were sickly when you were young, and even though you were two years older than me, it was difficult to watch. Whenever you fell ill, you acted so spoiled, but after you grew up a bit, you were deeply afraid that the junior disciples would look down on you, finding you undignified. So you put on a stern and steady face, day in and day out. Even now, I still remember you chasing after me, pestering me to call you ‘Shixiong!’”

Yu Ai’s expression softened a little at the memory. “Yes, I remember too. I was an ill-tempered child. I acted aloof around everyone; I was difficult and sarcastic. Even Xiao-shimei avoided me. Of all our martial siblings, you were the most good-natured. You were always the one who put up with me.”

“Regardless of how good my nature is, I still have a line that cannot be crossed,” said Shen Qiao. “You wanted to be sect leader, so you plotted to make me lose to Kunye. I have nothing to say about that. I can only blame myself for being completely unguarded against you, for misjudging you. But the Göktürks are hugely ambitious and have long coveted the great empire that lies within the Central Plains. Xuandu Mountain has never sided with any country in their attempts at unification, but we’d never work with the Göktürks!”

Yu Ai forced a bitter smile. “I just knew you’d say something like that. Otherwise, why would I have gone to such painstaking lengths?”

“Perhaps the generations of sect leaders who set out our principles of seclusion were in the wrong. But they were right about not working with

the Göktürks. Turn back now. It's not yet too late."

"I've already made my decision, and I will not turn back," Yu Ai said angrily. "I grew up here too! Of course I want to see it become even better! I care just as much as you do, so why do you have to put on such a holier-than-thou act? Do you think that in all the world, you're the only person who's right? That everyone else is wrong?

"Why not go and ask the other disciples in the sect? They might not say it, but deep down, why wouldn't they be unsatisfied that Xuandu Mountain has lain dormant all these years? After the Jade Terrace Discussion, I can officially announce that the mountain will open up to accept disciples—Xuandu Mountain's reputation and status will flourish. I will never allow Tiantai Sect and Linchuan Academy to keep everything to themselves!"

Shen Qiao was silent for a long time. Yu Ai panted, all vented out, his chest rising and falling. The night breeze blew by, and neither had anything to say.

Yu Ai felt a faint ache begin in his heart. No matter what else happened, they could never return to the close relationship they used to share.

At last, Shen Qiao said, "Since you've already made up your mind, there's nothing more to say."

"Where are you going?" asked Yu Ai.

"When Kunye defeated me, I brought shame to Xuandu Mountain," Shen Qiao said coolly. "Even if the others say nothing, I lack the face[42] to be sect leader. And as for the poisoning, I have no proof. Even if I testify before the public, they probably won't believe me. They'll only think I'm dissatisfied and spouting nonsense. You've already calculated everything, so why does it matter to you where I'm going? Wherever I go, I won't interfere with your grand endeavors."

"You're badly injured," said Yu Ai softly. "You have to stay and recuperate."

Shen Qiao shook his head and turned to leave.

But behind him came Yu Ai's voice again, with a new, chilly air: "I won't let you go."

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Chapter 19:
Inquiry

"And what if I insist on leaving?" asked Shen Qiao.

Instead of answering, Yu Ai countered, "This is where you grew up, and the martial siblings you grew up with are here. Can you really bear to abandon Xuandu Mountain? To leave like this?"

Yu Ai tried both reason and affection to move him, but Shen Qiao still said, "If you're asking if I'll work with the Göktürks, I will not."

When he saw that he wouldn't budge, Yu Ai's tone grew even colder. "What difference does it make if you agree or not? Four of the seven Xuandu Mountain elders are already in favor of my plan. The other three are in secluded cultivation and unconcerned with mundane affairs. As for our martial siblings, Da-shixiong[43] is too kindhearted to take a side, so it's useless to talk to him. Si-shidi and Xiao-shimei[44] will be very happy to see you again, but that doesn't mean they'll agree with you. It's imperative that we reform Xuandu Mountain. I won't watch our sect suffer a slow decline, not in my lifetime, and neither will they.

"How else do you I think managed to become acting sect leader and stabilize things so quickly? Could I have made all this happen alone, without their tacit support and approval?

"You, Shizun, even the older generations of sect leaders, your ideas aren't going to work anymore. How can Xuandu Mountain only focus on our moral purity when there's so much unrest in the world?"

The night was silent—even the birds had disappeared completely from the sky. The wind had subsided; the leaves rustled no more. It was as if all the world had come to a standstill.

At some point, the bright moon had ducked behind the clouds, drowning heaven and earth in darkness. The candle in Yu Ai's hand flickered, slowly growing fainter until it finally went out.

Ever since Shen Qiao had gone blind, night and day made no difference to him.

He was also a human being—felt pain when he was injured and brooded when he was troubled. But he'd always believed that hope lay ahead, and he was willing to face any obstacle with an optimistic mind. Though many heavy doubts had weighed in his heart after he recovered his memories, he didn't become disheartened or discouraged. He still wanted to go to Xuandu Mountain, to get an explanation face-to-face.

But at this moment, with the truth laid out before him, Shen Qiao felt a deep exhaustion rise up inside him all at once. It was as if there was a hand clutching at him, trying to drag him down into the freezing sea.

Involuntarily, he clenched the bamboo cane in his hand.

When Yu Ai saw the expression on Shen Qiao's face, it did anguish him a bit. But at this point, he felt that there were some things he had to say clearly.

"Shixiong, nobody wants to wallow in solitude. Xuandu Mountain is clearly the world's number one Daoist sect, and it has the strength to support an enlightened ruler who can help Daoism influence the world. So why must we act like hermits and hide ourselves away in the mountains? Everyone on Xuandu Mountain agrees except you. You're the one who's being too naive!"

Shen Qiao drew a deep breath. "Kunye is of the Göktürks. By working with him, surely you don't intend to give the Göktürks an inroad into the Central Plains?"

"Of course not," said Yu Ai. "As I said, working with Kunye is only one step in my plan. No matter how much I wish for Xuandu Mountain's return to the secular world, I would never side with the Göktürks. The Göktürks are ferocious and brutal, not enlightened rulers at all."

Shen Qiao's brows pinched. He had a vague suspicion that Yu Ai had embroiled Xuandu Mountain in some sort of grand scheme, but with his mind in such disarray, he couldn't fathom what it was.

"Now that you've returned, we can go back to how it was before," Yu Ai said. "No distance between us, close as brothers. Your eyes haven't recovered yet, and you still have internal injuries. Just climbing the

mountain must have taken a lot of effort. How far can you manage to get in such a state? Xuandu Mountain is your home."

Shen Qiao slowly, slowly shook his head. "You walk your bright and glorious path, I'll walk my lone wooden plank. I'd rather not be a figurehead sect leader. From now on…"

He was about to say something callous about tearing his robe and breaking off relationships, but then scenes of their childhood flashed before his eyes—the two of them growing up together.

Their friendship was still vivid in his mind. A few words claiming it was lost wouldn't be enough to truly dissolve their bond.

Shen Qiao released a soundless sigh. In the end, he said nothing. He only pressed his lips together tightly, then turned and left.

Of all the martial siblings under Qi Fengge's tutelage, Shen Qiao was the most talented, but with the top martial artist in the world as their master, the rest weren't too shabby either. Qi Fengge only accepted disciples who were naturally gifted, with excellent foundations.

If Shen Qiao was at the height of his powers, then Yu Ai might not have been able to stop him. But Yu Ai didn't hesitate to move against him now.

Without a second thought, he flashed right in front of Shen Qiao, blocking his way.

"Don't go, Shixiong," he said severely, and he reached out, meaning to knock Shen Qiao unconscious.

But Shen Qiao must have anticipated this move—he stepped back before Yu Ai reached him, raising his bamboo cane as if to parry.

Of course, Yu Ai didn't take Shen Qiao's defense seriously. He reached out to grab the bamboo cane.

He was sure he'd catch it too, but somehow, he came up empty-handed.

The bamboo cane slipped away from his grasp, advancing instead of retreating, and struck at his wrist.

Yu Ai frowned minutely and flicked his fingers, reaching out to grab Shen Qiao's shoulder with his other hand. His sleeves rustled in the still air, and he moved behind Shen Qiao to block his path of retreat.

Yu Ai caught Shen Qiao square on the shoulder. He'd used a fair deal of force, and slight pain jolted through Shen Qiao at the contact. But he paid it no heed, and used the bamboo cane in his hand to strike out at Yu Ai's waist. There was an old injury there from when Yu Ai had fallen from a tree as a child. He'd suffered fractures, and although they later healed, the memory of pain left a small shadow on Yu Ai's mind. He moved instinctively to avoid the hit.

Shen Qiao had only recovered three-tenths of his strength and was no match for Yu Ai. But the two of them had known each other since their youth, so despite his blindness, Shen Qiao still knew every possible move Yu Ai might make, every trick he might employ, like the back of his own hand. Shen Qiao was also certain that Yu Ai didn't want to kill him, so he attacked without the slightest misgiving.

Of course, Yu Ai knew Shen Qiao as well. They exchanged blows for a while, and Yu Ai began to grow agitated. Not wanting to drag this out any further, he aimed a palm strike directly at Shen Qiao's shoulder, this time using true qi.

The palm strike swept up a wind before it, and at the sound of it, Shen Qiao automatically raised his bamboo cane to block, but it was futile. The true qi came right at his chest, and with a snap, his bamboo cane broke in two. Shen Qiao stumbled back several steps, staggered twice, and then fell to the ground.

"A-Qiao, stop this and come home with me. Once Xiao-shimei and the others hear that you've returned, they'll be overjoyed!" Yu Ai took a couple of steps forward, preparing to pull the other man up.

Shen Qiao said nothing.

Yu Ai had just grasped him by the wrist when he saw something sweep towards him, as forceful as a tempest—it was the broken piece of bamboo cane that Shen Qiao was holding.

Shen Qiao had been saving up all his power, holding it back, just waiting for his opponent to let his guard down.

Yu Ai hadn't thought that Shen Qiao, injured and blind as he was, would still have the strength for a counterattack.

He didn't know that Shen Qiao was only at three-tenths of his usual strength. Yu Ai dared not risk a direct hit when he saw how fiercely that bamboo cane moved—it came at him with power as frigid as an icy spring, cold enough to pierce to the marrow. He dodged to the side. Shen Qiao didn't press the attack. He withdrew his palm and turned, retreating back down the path straight away.

Shen Qiao had grown up there, and he could still manage to distinguish his surroundings, even if he couldn't see them. Stepping lightly with his qinggong, he rushed onwards with Yu Ai in hot pursuit. Without looking back, Shen Qiao pinpointed Yu Ai by sound, then flung the broken piece of bamboo cane behind him.

Determined to keep him at Xuandu Mountain, Yu Ai was done holding back. With a furl of his sleeves, he flung the broken bamboo right back at Shen Qiao.

Shen Qiao heard the sound of something whistling through the air from behind him just as the bamboo cane grazed past his shoulder. It sliced through his clothes, and blood welled from the wound immediately. Shen Qiao chose to endure the pain. He kept going forward, not evading, even though he staggered as he went.

In the blink of an eye, Yu Ai caught up to him and lashed out with a palm strike. Shen Qiao had no time to dodge—the blow hit him square in the back. Blood gushed from his mouth, and he fell face-first to the ground. After that, all he could do was curl up and gasp for breath.

"Stop running!" Yu Ai reached down to yank him to his feet, truly angry now. "When did you get so stubborn? I don't want to hurt you, so why won't you just listen?"

"Who wouldn't run when they know they're about to be held captive? Only a fool!"

A mocking laugh, sinister and cold, rang out from somewhere in the darkness.

Alarmed, Yu Ai stopped and looked around, yet found no trace of the other man.

"What lowly scoundrel is hiding there? Come out!"

"I used to think that Qi Fengge's disciples had to be at least halfway decent, considering that he himself was the heavenly pride of his generation. But who would have guessed? Shen Qiao being nearly crippled is one thing, but to think that Yu Ai, the Acting Sect Leader, is only mediocre in martial arts. If Qi Fengge hears about this in the netherworld, I fear it'll disturb his eternal rest!"

In the next moment, Yan Wushi appeared, ridicule and contempt written all over his face.

Even with his martial arts, Yu Ai couldn't tell where he'd come from or where he'd been hiding.

He was terribly alarmed, but he kept his expression calm. "May I know this distinguished master's esteemed name?" he asked. "For what important reason have you come to visit Xuandu Mountain in the middle of the night? If you are one of my master's old friends, I must ask you to come to the main hall for tea."

"Xuandu Mountain without Qi Fengge is far too dull. I have no need to drink your tea, and in any case, you're not qualified to drink tea with me."

Yu Ai intended to bring Xuandu Mountain into the secular world, so of course he'd done quite a bit of homework. He searched his mind. Judging by how presumptuous and arrogant this man was, and how uncanny his martial arts were, Yu Ai landed on a name. "Yan Wushi? You're the Demon Lord, Yan Wushi?"

Yan Wushi frowned. "That title, Demon Lord…this venerable one quite dislikes it."

Yu Ai's face was grave. He skipped right past whatever Yan Wushi liked or disliked. "Dare I ask what business Sect Leader Yan has on Xuandu Mountain? This humble Yu is currently dealing with the sect's internal affairs, so he's unable to offer proper hospitality. He asks Sect Leader Yan to visit again, in the daytime."

"I can come whenever I want. Since when do you have the right to order me around?"

Yu Ai had been startled by Yan Wushi's sudden appearance. Now that he had time to think about it carefully, it occurred to him that Xuandu Mountain wasn't a place someone could barge into at will. Even a grandmaster of martial arts like Yan Wushi or Ruyan Kehui couldn't just enter whenever they wanted, as if they were strolling onto some empty, unguarded plot of land. The only possibility was that he'd come via the narrow route that hugged the back mountain's cliff.

He whipped around to look at Shen Qiao.

Shen Qiao had his head slightly lowered, so Yu Ai couldn't see his expression. Then he placed his hand on a nearby tree trunk, straining to stand while using it for support. He looked as if a gust of wind would blow him over.

But then the wind really did grow stronger, whipping at his robes until they rustled and flapped, and he simply stood there, firmly rooted. As if even a hundred calamities wouldn't be enough to break him.

When Yu Ai saw that Shen Qiao wasn't at all surprised by Yan Wushi's appearance, a possibility occurred to him, one that left him shocked and furious.

"A-Qiao, how could you get involved with people from the demonic sects?!"

At that, Shen Qiao let out a slow breath that carried the scent of blood. He wiped the smears from the corner of his mouth and rasped, "You've colluded with the Göktürks. So why shouldn't I keep company with people from the demonic sects?"

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Chapter 20:
Enjoying the Show

Shen Qiao's words rendered Yu Ai temporarily speechless.

And Yan Wushi just had to fan the flames. "Qi Fengge let Hulugu walk away, then Hulugu goes and takes a disciple who throws Qi Fengge's disciple off a cliff," he said, nonchalant. "Meanwhile Qi Fengge accepted a disciple, but that disciple was so ambitious that he colluded with the Göktürks against his own shixiong to make himself sect leader. I reckon Qi Fengge would leap right up out of his coffin if he caught wind of this down in the netherworld, hm? He'd be furious."

The taunting stoked Yu Ai's anger. He barely managed to tamp it down as he coldly replied, "It's rather impolite of Sect Leader Yan to arrive uninvited in the middle of the night. This Yu still has family matters that he must attend to, so forgive him for being unable to see you off!"

"What a joke," said Yan Wushi. "My venerable self will come and go as I wish. There's no place in the world that can stop me. If Qi Fengge tried that, my venerable self might leave some of his dignity intact, but you? Who do you think you are?"

Nobody had ever said anything like this to Yu Ai in his life. He was hot-blooded as a youth, and it was only under Shen Qiao's subtle influence that he'd grown gentler over the years. Now his old fiery temper was provoked and rekindling.

His fingers twitched inside his sleeves. At first, he wanted to summon others to help him, but in the end, he thought better of it. Shen Qiao was popular on Xuandu Mountain, with an excellent reputation. It was true that the others approved of Yu Ai's proposal and shared the hope that Xuandu Mountain could enter the secular world anew and participate in the contest for reunification by supporting a ruler. But that didn't mean they wanted their leadership to change. Not to mention there was a decent chance the elders and martial siblings would soften at the sight of Shen Qiao, given the way he looked at the moment. They might just change their minds. If that happened, the situation could spiral into chaos.

Considering that, he shook out his sleeve: a longsword appeared in his hand.

This was one of the three swords Qi Fengge had passed down to his disciples. Shanhe Tongbei, he gave to Shen Qiao. His youngest female disciple, Gu Hengbo, received the sword Tianwei Sheichun.[45] And the third sword, Junzi Buqi[46]—that was the one Yu Ai held now.

A swing of the sword shot rainbowed ribbons of brilliant, billowing light out into the dark, dazzling but uncanny. Only one who'd honed Xuandu Mountain's Azure Waves sword technique to its ultimate level could create such a sword glare. Beam after beam came in great swells that built momentum relentlessly until they arrived like a tempest—powerful and wrathful enough to swallow heaven and earth.

In the eye of that storm, his opponent would feel like a deluge was pouring down around him, the raindrops violently crashing down until they seemed on the verge of shattering the ground itself. A frigid, sweeping gale sliced through the air like knives, filling all with terror as the blades slashed through bones and speared into bowels.

At some point, Yan Wushi had risen up into the air. At first glance, it looked like he'd been blown back by the raging winds, his feet floating off the ground. He kept one hand behind his back, and the other held out flat before him, palm first. With a furl and a flick of his sleeve, he first swept away most of the barrage of sword rain, then extended a single index finger.

It was the same finger he'd used against Yu Shengyan beneath the cliff at Banbu Peak.

The difference was: against Yu Shengyan, he'd only used half his strength. Now, he was using eight parts of ten.

The sword glare that had blotted out the heavens condensed. The tip of Yu Ai's sword twirled once in a ring of light, then dove to meet Yan Wushi's finger.

Two torrents of true qi met at their point and exploded, the blast radiating out around them. In the center, their wide sleeves whipped and unfurled. Outside the circle, things were worse.

Shen Qiao had dodged to the side when Yu Ai and Yan Wushi attacked each other, but that wasn't enough to avoid the shock wave. He

almost lost his balance when the impact came.

The sword's point was infused with true qi, and it created a turbulent upsurge. Like a massive, rushing wave, it broke and crashed over Yan Wushi's head!

The Azure Waves sword technique was true to its name. Qi Fengge came up with this technique while overlooking the great sea to the east. Over the years, he made some improvements to it, and eventually it became the introductory martial arts practiced by all Xuandu Mountain disciples. But even though it was introductory, the distinction between superior and inferior martial artists became apparent when they practiced the same sword technique.

Such was the case with Yu Ai. He'd attained the level where "authentic understanding of the spirit surpasses rigid mimicry of the form," and had integrated much of his own understanding of swordplay into the Azure Waves sword technique. He'd achieved true, perfect command of it —he and his sword were nearly one and the same.

Yet his attack was thwarted by one single finger of Yan Wushi's hand.

Close observation would reveal that Yan Wushi's finger was not still, nor simply pressed against the point of the blade. To the contrary, he was moving incredibly fast—too fast to be seen. So, while it looked like he was motionless, in truth his hand had never stopped moving. His finger darted as if it could see precisely where to go—it lightly grazed several spots, and each just happened to be the weakest points in Yu Ai's barrier of true qi.

Just then, Yu Ai remembered the review of the world's top martial arts experts that his master Qi Fengge had given them when he'd still been alive. Yan Wushi was mentioned in that lesson. Back then, everyone thought Qi Fengge's greatest rival was the Göktürk master Hulugu. But Qi Fengge said that Yan Wushi's talents would see him surpass Hulugu within a few years. He might even be capable of defeating Qi Fengge himself. He'd seen that Yan Wushi's martial arts had already progressed past the point of strict adherence to set forms. It changed as it pleased him to change.

For most people, the *Zhuyang Strategy* was the key to deepening their martial arts as they strove towards the pinnacle of martial prowess. But for Yan Wushi, it was just a point of reference. Instead of emulating the *Zhuyang Strategy*, instead of recultivating his qi from scratch, he simply used it to patch up the deficiencies in his own martial abilities.

Yan Wushi's martial arts included the infamous Spring Waters finger technique. After they fought, Qi Fengge used two lines of poetry to describe it: "The spring waters ripple, my reflection embraced; my wishful fancies crumble, only ash remains."

When Yu Ai had first heard those lines, he couldn't grasp their meaning. They'd seemed to be about a woman lamenting her long-faded feelings.

But he finally understood what the second line meant.

Because accompanying his opponent's finger technique was a towering tide of true qi—not only did it block his attack, it nearly collapsed the barrier Yu Ai had painstakingly constructed using the qi from his sword. The feeling of it, the pressure, was exactly as Qi Fengge had described: his "wishful fancies" had crumbled, and now only ash remained.

Yu Ai was forced to push the transmission of his sword qi to its limit.

But just a few moments later, his attack went up like an explosion of smoke and haze, its dense vapor suspended in the air. Wind burst forth from nowhere, and giant boulders split in a thunderous roar!

A whining buzz filled Shen Qiao's ears. For a moment, he couldn't hear anything else.

On such a silent night, the explosion's roar alarmed the other people on Xuandu Mountain. Lamplights flickered to life in the distance, one by one, and quite a few people threw on their clothes and headed for the source of the commotion.

Things had progressed far beyond what Yu Ai had anticipated. He'd wanted to finish this fight quickly and quietly, but he hadn't accounted for Yan Wushi interfering. The situation had slipped out of his control.

Both of them ceased their attacks, and Yu Ai backed up three steps, while Yan Wushi backed up two.

But Yu Ai had gone all-out in their fight, while Yan Wushi used only eight parts of his strength. Everyone knew who'd come out on top.

Despite everything, Yan Wushi remained composed. He had a look on his face like he was greatly entertained.

Yu Ai gritted his teeth and didn't speak. Part of him welcomed the others, since the combined strength of several elders would surely be enough to detain that trespassing madman, Yan Wushi, and that in turn would keep Shen Qiao from leaving. But another part of him didn't want anyone else from Xuandu Mountain to see Shen Qiao.

He was still thinking it over when the first person arrived.

It was Qi Fengge's first disciple, Tan Yuanchun.

He was the shixiong of Shen Qiao and Yu Ai. His abilities were only average and his temperament mild—a peacemaker when faced with conflict, a bleeding heart who couldn't offend anyone. His disposition and martial ability made him unsuited for sect leader, but his forgiving and charitable nature earned him the deep respect of all his martial siblings, Shen Qiao included. After Shen Qiao became sect leader, Tan Yuanchun was made an elder and busied himself every day with the education of the next generation of disciples.

“Yu-shidi?” Tan Yuanchun found Yu Ai with a single glance, looking rather surprised. “That sound just now, was from you…? And who’s this?”

“Huanyue Sect Leader Yan,” said Yu Ai.

When he heard Yu Ai’s offhand introduction, Tan Yuanchun drew in a cold gasp.

Why was the Demon Lord of the demonic sects here?

Yan Wushi was in a good mood; he even took the initiative to greet Tan Yuanchun. “You’re Qi Fengge’s first disciple? Years ago, I fought your master and lost to him, but now his disciples are all completely useless. Would you like to have a try too?”

Tan Yuanchun was speechless.

Yan Wushi turned to look at Yu Ai, who said severely, “Sect Leader Yan might be peerless in martial arts, but Xuandu Mountain’s numbers are still enough to keep one man here. Does Sect Leader Yan find Xuandu Mountain’s scenery so spectacular that he can’t bear to go?”

Yan Wushi sneered a bit. “Xuandu Mountain without Qi Fengge is utterly worthless in my eyes.”

He looked at Shen Qiao and spoke with ridicule. “Still unwilling to leave? Are you waiting for your shidi to imprison you so the two of you can chat about your friendship?”

Only then did Tan Yuanchun notice that another person was there, standing beneath a nearby tree. He’d failed to notice the other person—he was half-concealed in shadows, his breathing very faint, and Yan Wushi had caught his attention by speaking first.

Just one glance shocked him. “Zhangjiao-shidi?!” he blurted out.

Shen Qiao, supporting himself with the tree trunk, nodded in the direction of his voice. “Has Da-shixiong been well?”

Tan Yuanchun was surprised and delighted. Taking a couple of steps forward, he asked, “Are you all right? When did you return, how did…”

Yu Ai stopped him. “Da-shixiong!”

Cut off, Tan Yuanchun remembered what Yan Wushi had just said. Tan Yuanchun whipped around to face Yu Ai. “What exactly is going on

here?"

It was Shen Qiao who answered. "Da-shixiong, is it true that you're planning to elect Yu-shidi as the new sect leader?"

Tan Yuanchun appeared troubled—he looked at Yu Ai, then back at Shen Qiao. He wasn't good at finding the diplomatic thing to say, so he went with the truth. "While you were gone, we've relied on Yu-shidi to handle our internal affairs. After all, he assisted you with everything before, so he's the only one who understands Xuandu Mountain's workings from top to bottom. After you fell from the cliff, several elders held a discussion and decided to let Yu-shidi take over as acting sect leader first, until…Well, it's good that you're back. Recuperate now, the rest can be discussed after. There'll be plenty of time for that!"

Shen Qiao understood very well that if he truly remained here today, he would never hold the position of sect leader again. Not with his loss to Kunye, and his own grievous injuries on top of that. Even if the others didn't object, he himself wouldn't have the face to take up the title again. Xuandu's Violet Palace would remain in the hands of Yu Ai, and regardless of whether or not Shen Qiao stuck around, he wouldn't be able to stop him from working with the Göktürks. In fact, in his current condition, he'd only be placing himself at the mercy of others.

Knowing this drew a silent sigh from him. All his hesitation was gone. "This Shen asks Sect Leader Yan to bring him away with you."

"A-Qiao!"

"Shidi!"

Both of them spoke at the same time—Yu Ai with anger, Tan Yuanchun with shock. He didn't understand when Shen Qiao could have gotten involved with people of the demonic sects.

Yan Wushi raised an eyebrow. He seemed unsurprised by Shen Qiao's decision. In fact, he looked like he found it exceptionally amusing. "It's not too late for you to turn back," he said deliberately.

Indistinct lamplight glowed in the distance, moving closer and closer—the Xuandu Mountain disciples running towards them, one after another.

A blind man's ears were extraordinarily sensitive: although Shen Qiao could see little, he could hear them approaching.

He shook his head. "No."

When he saw Yan Wushi preparing to leave with Shen Qiao, Yu Ai was furious and appalled. He raised his sword, moving to stop them. "Wait!"

Yan Wushi neither dodged nor avoided. Instead, he grabbed Shen Qiao by the lower back and shoved him forward, making him the target of Yu Ai's attack in an instant.

Tan Yuanchun was horrified. "San-shidi, stop!"

Alarmed, Yu Ai quickly withdrew his attack and backed away. Yan Wushi bellowed with laughter. Then, in the blink of an eye, he and Shen Qiao disappeared without a trace.

Only the sound of his laughter remained, echoing in the emptiness.

Yu Ai exploded with rage. "That shameless madman!"

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Chapter 21:
Altercation

OF COURSE, all martial experts would show at least a few characteristics befitting such a figure. Some couldn't set aside their pride, some the prestige of their position. Most people of high status and standing, for the sake of their own dignity, wouldn't have it in them to use someone as a human shield. Only someone like Yan Wushi, who could destroy a *Zhuyang Strategy* scroll without a second thought, could pull off such a shameless move. No wonder Yu Ai was hopping mad, and Shen Qiao himself was at a loss for words.

Yan Wushi brought him all the way down the mountain and straight through Xuandu Town, until they arrived at a relay station that stood where they'd first entered the outskirts of town. Here grew a sparse patch of trees, but it was still fairly open.

He set Shen Qiao down.

Shen Qiao cupped his hands. "Many thanks."

He'd been injured during his fight with Yu Ai. His whole body was full of blocked qi and stagnant blood. Only now, after some time had passed, did he feel the warmth slowly return to his body, sensation flowing back into his arms and legs.

Yan Wushi, however, gave him a discourteous sneer. "So, what exactly was the point of your trip to Xuandu Mountain? It only confirmed what I said before: if a person stands to gain from something, their heart is worthless. Your martial siblings—people you grew up with—they didn't hesitate to betray you when it served their interests. They let you fall from a cliff without a single care, just to secure the title of sect leader. Qi Fengge boasted that his sect was righteous and just, honest and candid, but his disciples conduct themselves like they were taught in one of our demonic sects! Truly incredible!"

Of course, he knew that Xuandu Mountain had searched tirelessly for Shen Qiao after he fell from the cliff, and that they'd come up empty-

handed because he himself had rescued Shen Qiao. But Yan Wushi had no reason to speak up on their behalf—he was more than happy to see Shen Qiao become despondent, to watch him go from a softhearted, downtrodden sect leader to a man who hated and resented all the world.

But Shen Qiao didn't pick up the conversation; he sought out a boulder nearby and slowly lowered himself onto it.

Yu Ai tended towards stubbornness, and was strongly utilitarian. He strove for perfection in everything he did, and he'd been that way since he was a child. If he hadn't been at Xuandu Mountain, he might have been another Yan Wushi by now. But all these years, he put his heart and soul into Xuandu Mountain without even a bit of hidden selfishness. The martial siblings all loved each other devotedly, and it was enough to warm even the hardest of hearts. Furthermore, Yu Ai *wasn't* Yan Wushi. Before his betrayal, Shen Qiao would never have thought he would do such a thing. Even if Qi Fengge was revived, he'd likely think the same.

Yu Ai had engineered his defeat at Kunye's hands. He let Shen Qiao lose to a Göktürk in full view of everyone. With his reputation in pieces, Yu Ai had simply stepped into Shen Qiao's position. It wasn't as if anyone would think him unqualified, and it'd be smooth sailing from then on. After all, even if Shen Qiao were still alive, he wouldn't have the face to ask to continue as the sect leader.

All of this sounded very reasonable. But combined with Yu Ai's sincere agitation when he'd spoken of his own troubles, and that he'd said he was doing it all so that Xuandu Mountain could stand above the other sects in the world, then things started to look a bit odd.

If the troubles Yu Ai spoke of were real, and he really did have another reason for his actions, then he couldn't have just been talking about colluding with Kunye to throw Shen Qiao off the cliff.

He was definitely working with the Göktürks on even greater and more important matters.

Shen Qiao furrowed his brow, his head prickling with pain, as if it were being stabbed with needles. No matter which way he turned it over in his mind, he still failed to understand.

There had been frequent regime changes since the Jin Dynasty's move south and the Uprising of the Five Barbarians. But even though the Zhou and the Qi carried strong northern influences, they'd still followed the Han way of doing things and so had gradually acculturated. If they were the ones who unified the world, then people would find it acceptable, though perhaps with some difficulty. But if instead it were the likes of the Göktürk royal court—still living like brutish nomads, grazing their livestock on the grasslands and periodically invading the Central Plains—they weren't considered enlightened rulers by any stretch of the imagination.

The image of the Göktürks as capricious, coarse, and thuggish was deeply entrenched in the hearts of the people of the Central Plains. Yu Ai would never risk such universal condemnation if there wasn't some absolutely astronomical benefit to be had.

So then what was Yu Ai plotting, and what would he get out of it from the Göktürks? Or, one could say, what would Xuandu Mountain get out of it?

Shen Qiao did not bring such things to Yan Wushi for discussion.

Even though the two of them were much closer now, they still weren't friends. Plus, Yan Wushi was mercurial, his morality unpredictable; it was foolish to seek sincere advice when they had such a shallow bond.

Shen Qiao could only mull it over by himself, turning the issue this way and that within his mind.

But no matter how he mulled, it felt like there was a thin piece of window paper between him and the answer—he couldn't see through well enough to untangle it.

"Had enough rest?" Yan Wushi said suddenly.

Shen Qiao looked up, nonplussed. His distraction left him with a bit of a guileless expression.

"If you've had enough rest, let's fight."

Shen Qiao took a long moment to digest that. He forced a wry smile. "Sect Leader Yan, how could I possibly be your match? Didn't you prove that already?"

Baffled, Yan Wushi replied, “Why else would I bring you with me? What’s it to me if you live or die? If I’d just wanted the *Zhuyang Strategy* scroll, I would have gone straight to Xuandu Mountain myself. Why bring along dead weight like you? But you have two *Zhuyang Strategy* volumes within you. It’s only a matter of time before you regain your martial arts. Such good fortune doesn’t come to just anyone. For a long time, I’ve wanted to study Tao Hongjing’s martial arts by using someone proficient with the *Zhuyang Strategy*. I can’t fight against myself, though, and I certainly can’t go hunt down that bald donkey Xueting to practice against. Doesn’t that make you the most suitable candidate?”

The corners of Shen Qiao’s mouth twitched. He had no idea what to say.

After a while, he finally replied, “I only have three-tenths of my strength back, and I was injured when I fought Yu Ai just now. I fear my ability will be lacking.”

“That’s why I’ve granted you a great mercy, letting you sit there and rest for a while.”

“I’m beginning to feel like being detained on Xuandu Mountain wasn’t that bad an option,” Shen Qiao said helplessly.

“You’ve already regained your memory,” said Yan Wushi. “That means you’re able to remember that volume of *Zhuyang Strategy* you learned before and use it at will. Furthermore, reading the other volume at Chuyun Temple was enough for you to absorb it in its entirety, taking your skills to the next level.”

Shen Qiao thought about it, then nodded with sincerity. “That’s indeed the case.”

Taking this into account, although Yan Wushi’s motives weren’t pure, and he’d repeatedly used Shen Qiao for his own purposes as well as simply to amuse himself, he still felt like he needed to show more gratitude.

“I haven’t properly thanked Sect Leader Yan since leaving the villa,” he said. “If not for you, I fear I’d have become a lost soul at the base of Banbu Peak.”

“What you should thank is the *Zhuyang Strategy*’s true qi that’s inside your body,” said Yan Wushi. “If not for that, I wouldn’t have

bothered to save you."

It was a rather bleak conversation, but Shen Qiao replied in good cheer. "…All right, I will go burn some incense for Shizun, to thank his esteemed self for passing the *Zhuyang Strategy* down to me."

"I couldn't sense any of the *Zhuyang Strategy*'s true qi within Yu Ai's body when we fought, so I believe Qi Fengge only passed it down to you."

Shen Qiao nodded. "That's right. I was alone the day Shizun conveyed to me the Volume of Lost Soul and ordered me to memorize it through recitation. He forbade me from writing it down. It's rumored that Xuandu Mountain has a *Zhuyang Strategy* scroll hidden away, but I don't know if it's still there."

Yan Wushi found this very interesting. "Didn't Qi Fengge wish for Xuandu Mountain's legacy to be passed down through the generations? Didn't he want each and every disciple to excel? Why did he only show the Volume of Lost Soul to you?"

Shen Qiao replied slowly. "I asked Shizun about this matter before, but he didn't answer. Shizun and Perfected Master Tao were old friends in life. I heard that after Perfected Master Tao completed the *Zhuyang Strategy*, he was filled with regret. He thought that if the book got out, it would lead to endless conflict and strife in the world, that many people would die as a result. I think perhaps Shizun felt the same way, to a certain degree. He wanted his old friend's life's work to be passed down, but he also didn't want it to spread too far, lest the world fight and kill each other over it. That's why he made such a contradictory decision."

Yan Wushi snorted in disdain. "What foolish softheartedness! Qi Fengge was always like that. He didn't finish Hulugu off when they fought and ended up leaving behind a disaster lying in wait for his successors! Peerless in martial arts but with the heart of an indecisive woman. If that's how he felt, then why teach martial arts to the Xuandu Mountain disciples at all? Wouldn't it be better to change Xuandu Mountain into an ordinary Daoist monastery? If you wish for a world without war, start with yourself."

His words were harsh and biting, but not completely without merit.

Shen Qiao and his master were the same in one aspect, and that was their benevolent heart, always considerate and gentle towards others. But he and Qi Fengge also had their differences. These days, Shen Qiao wandered the outside world, and there he witnessed the impoverished livelihoods and the suffering of the common people, the powers of the world, and how they'd all been drawn into this game of chess. Seeing all this gradually changed Shen Qiao's mindset. He'd realized that Xuandu Mountain also stood in the dust of the mortal realm, that it was impossible for them to peacefully detach themselves from worldly affairs. It was only a matter of time before they must enter the game themselves.

It was a pity that he hadn't had the time to make any reforms for Xuandu Mountain. Yu Ai jumped in to replace him and was intent on steering Xuandu Mountain in an unknown direction.

Shen Qiao lowered his head, sinking into deep contemplation.

But from nearby, Yan Wushi silently and without warning pointed his finger at Shen Qiao.

Ever since Shen Qiao lost his vision, he'd deliberately trained his ears. Now he heard a faint, strange noise and quickly smacked the boulder as he sprang up, moving backwards with great speed.

Xuandu Mountain's qinggong was unmatched. When he executed this set of steps, called "A Rainbow Stretches across the Heavens," his figure was like a lotus above the water, seeking gently back and forth beneath the wind's caress, or like a willow slowly unfurling its branches, the motion indescribably lovely. One could already see the faint shadow of his power at its full height.

But Shen Qiao's strength hadn't yet recovered, and Yan Wushi was much faster. A half step later, the boulder he'd been sitting on shattered with a roar, its shards exploding outward towards Shen Qiao.

Fortunately, Shen Qiao summoned his true qi in time, so he escaped taking a rain of rubble to the face, but the razor-sharp shards shredded half his sleeve and slashed into his wrist. His pale wrist was immediately streaked with blood.

"'The spring waters ripple, my reflection embraced; my wishful fancies crumble, only ash remains.' Its reputation is truly well deserved."

Shen Qiao ignored the injury, instead focusing all his attention on listening for the sound of his opponent's movements.

Yan Wushi wasn't in the habit of showing any mercy once he'd attacked.

After all the time they'd spent together recently, Shen Qiao was very clear about this particular point.

He would have to fight until his opponent was satisfied or else he'd die, and die in vain.

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Chapter 22:
Spring Waters Finger Technique

THE SPRING WATERS FINGER TECHNIQUE was one of the techniques that had made Yan Wushi famous. He'd defeated countless martial experts with it, and Qi Fengge had even picked out two lines of poetry to describe it—a clear sign that it was an exquisite technique.

And Yan Wushi had only gotten better with time.

But not many people knew that this finger technique was adapted from a sword technique.

Yan Wushi had once been a sword master, and he had a sword that never left his side. But when he lost his sword and couldn't find a satisfactory replacement, he decided to use his finger as a substitute. It turned out to be a happy mistake, and using this he created a finger technique with an achingly tender name. Only those who'd faced it would know of the raging tempest Shen Qiao was now up against.

Someone with sharp eyes would see that Yan Wushi's movements were very slow, elegant, and gentle, as if he were merely brushing a leaf from his opponent's shoulder. But his finger was blurred with the afterimages of where it'd been, and it was impossible to determine exactly which of the images was his real hand.

Shen Qiao was a blind man. Without visual distractions, the other senses sharpened.

He felt a crushing, mountainous pressure bearing down on him from all directions, threatening to flatten or pulverize him, its true qi overwhelming everything. The pressure wasn't uniform—it followed the movements of Yan Wushi's finger. Sometimes he felt it on his shoulder, sometimes it struck at his neck. It was fleeting, erratic, and impossible to defend against.

Shen Qiao's whole body was enveloped in the pressure Yan Wushi had created. It was like he was surrounded by walls on all sides, the dense layers of true qi swelling in at him like a tide. There was nowhere to

advance nor retreat, and the moment his internal energy was depleted, Yan Wushi's finger would reach him, would touch him, gentle as spring water.

That would mean his death.

Shen Qiao had only three-tenths of his internal energy, leaving him below the jianghu's second-rate experts. Normally, a martial artist at that level couldn't dream of surviving against Yan Wushi. But Shen Qiao did have an advantage: his Xuandu Mountain martial arts and the two volumes of the *Zhuyang Strategy*. Though there'd been too little time for him to completely integrate all he'd memorized, the return of his memory brought with it his knowledge of self-defense. No longer would he be completely passive like before.

His sleeve raised, he too substituted his hand for a sword, forming a seal.

This was the initiating gesture of the Azure Waves sword technique, "The Cool Breeze Gently Blows."

The Azure Waves sword technique was the same set of sword moves that Yu Ai had used in his duel against Yan Wushi.

Though Xuandu Mountain was world-famous, they didn't possess a large variety of martial arts—they only had two sets of sword techniques.

This was because Qi Fengge believed martial arts were paramount and that, like with many such principles, it was all about abstraction, about reducing the complicated to the simple. True ingenuity was unassuming. Instead of amassing more and more moves, it was better to hone just two sets to their ultimate peak until total control was achieved.

"The Cool Breeze Gently Blows," as its name implied, started with a gesture that was gentle and accommodating, like one was basking in a refreshing breeze. Lacking a sword, Shen Qiao used his fingers instead. Making this gesture, he finally felt a sense of familiarity from his past.

True qi rose from his abdomen, flowing across the acupoints of his waist and up his spine before gathering at the base of his neck, then streaming down his arm and to his wrist. His opponent's true qi condensed into an ironclad enclosure that slammed towards him from all sides, and just as it closed in, Shen Qiao directed the flow of his qi to his fingertips.

There was a white slash like a sword glare: this was sword qi.

As the sword qi sliced forward, Shen Qiao switched tactics, imitating "Three Parts in Musical Harmony," from the Azure Waves sword technique. He sent out successive taps with his finger, and each one landed precisely on the nodes of the woven net Yan Wushi had formed with his true qi.

With a roar, smoke roiled, haze billowed, and sparks dazzled upon the net.

If their fight had an audience, they'd see an awe-inspiring brilliant light shining between the two. Shen Qiao, blind to such a sight, broke through his opponent's attack with only his mastery over qi.

For the combatants, it seemed that a long time passed between Yan Wushi starting his offensive and Shen Qiao destroying it. But in reality, it happened in the blink of an eye.

Yan Wushi was quite surprised, but in the next moment his expression changed to one of intent fascination.

He switched from finger to palm, his body drifting like a floating cloud—or a wraith. Yan Wushi struck three blows at Shen Qiao from three different directions.

The three palm strikes swept in like a sea-borne wind screaming through mountains, surging in vast torrents. They made Yan Wushi's first attack look like child's play. Now his elegant mask was torn off, and the savagery that lay beneath laid bare.

Three palm strikes, three directions.

Shen Qiao was just one person with two hands. He couldn't possibly defend on three sides at once!

He chose to retreat.

Since he'd defused Yan Wushi's first attack, there was no longer any true qi blocking the way behind him. But he'd only managed to back up a few steps before Yan Wushi's strikes came within inches of his face.

No matter how powerful Yan Wushi was, he was still only a human being—it was impossible for him to attack with three hands at once. They came in a sequence, albeit at a speed so ludicrously fast that nobody could have tracked it.

But Shen Qiao could, because he was blind.

A blind man need not see, only hear.

Since his injury, he'd suffered many hardships that would have been unimaginable to him before. And these hardships looked all the more stark after his memories returned.

At times, Shen Qiao had been lost, had been at a loss, had even been deeply wounded by the betrayal of his loved ones.

But in this moment, his heart was at peace.

He'd been at peace before, as Xuandu Mountain's sect leader, but that was the peace of someone who'd never suffered setbacks.

The peace he felt now came after he was lashed by winds and rain, beset by defeat and hardships.

After the tumult of a storm on the sea, the moon rises high above the clouds, painting the water and the heavens in one color.

No billows or swells, no joy or sorrow.

In late spring the thick brush grows, early autumn sees the layered clouds drift; within the well a lone lamp shines, upon the colored glaze does the moonlight glint.

Shen Qiao discerned the sequence of those three strikes, and his hands became as lotus flowers, opening and closing in an instant as he countered one after the other with "Rising Waves Form Blue Mountains," "The Sun and Moon Reside Within," and "Auspicious Clouds Roll in from the East," all from the Azure Waves sword technique.

No Xuandu Mountain disciples would have recognized them as Azure Waves sword technique moves, because in Shen Qiao's hands, they'd been completely transformed.

But if Qi Fengge were alive to see, he'd easily recognize that Shen Qiao's moves were no longer constrained to the maneuvers themselves—that they'd diverged even from the ways of sword qi and reached the echelon of sword intent.

The sword was the king of all weapons, and had always been deeply revered in martial arts. Nearly all practitioners in the jianghu used swords;

for many of them, their swordplay was nowhere near masterful and certainly didn't approach any kind of echelon.

There were four echelons of the sword: sword qi, sword intent, sword heart, and sword spirit.

When someone could manipulate the sword with qi, then they'd achieved the echelon of sword qi. All Xiantian experts could do this; before Shen Qiao lost his martial arts, he could too.

He was extraordinary talented—he grew up practicing with the sword, and by the age of twenty he'd already grown beyond the physical maneuvers when it came to the sword moves and entered the echelon of sword qi. Later, when Qi Fengge passed down a volume of the *Zhuyang Strategy* to him, he found within that scroll a method to condense true qi and combine it with the sword qi, which improved his swordplay more and more. If nothing had gone wrong, it would have been only a matter of time before he reached the echelon of sword intent.

But then he was challenged to a duel at Banbu Peak. Shen Qiao fell from the cliff, and everything came to an abrupt end.

If it weren't for a wisp of the *Zhuyang Strategy*'s true qi that still remained in his body, granting him a chance to start over, the martial arts he'd painstakingly cultivated during the first half of his life would have vanished with the wind.

Shen Qiao didn't fall, even as Yan Wushi pressed harder and harder. Instead, he rose to the echelon of sword intent. Yan Wushi, always perceptive, took notice of the change and was greatly surprised.

Not only surprised—excited as well.

When he'd forced Shen Qiao to fight him, it was only because Shen Qiao still carried the *Zhuyang Strategy*'s true qi. Yan Wushi hoped that fighting him would spark the inspiration he needed in order to grasp the essence of the *Zhuyang Strategy* and complete his self-made martial arts.

So the stronger his opponent was, the happier he became.

At that moment, Shen Qiao's heart was tranquil and completely at peace.

His mind had also entered an entirely new state, after reaching the echelon of sword intent. It was clear, boundless, and indescribably profound.

It was a vast world where the ocean embraced hundreds of rivers, where cliffs soared thousands of meters into the sky.

And it was a narrow world, with mere inches on which to move and no foothold to be found.

But where the sword intent lay, the principle of Dao also lay!

One begets two, two begets three, and three begets all things.[47]

There was no ground beneath his feet, but from his step came the ground. There was no light to be seen, but his heart itself possessed light.

In a state like that, Shen Qiao didn't need to see—he could clearly sense the trajectory of his opponent's strikes.

He waited quietly.

Yan Wushi pointed a finger between his brows.

Shen Qiao didn't retreat; he raised his hand to meet it.

His right hand lifted, his spread palm perfectly blocking that one finger.

In an instant, the nearby stones were sundered into rubble that streaked like shooting stars against the backdrop of the night!

All Shen Qiao felt was a roaring whine within his ears, then blood spilled from his nose and mouth. His entire body flew backwards against his will, slamming into a mighty tree trunk before landing heavily on the ground!

Yan Wushi made an incredulous sound, but his expression was deeply impressed.

He'd used at least half of his strength. Shen Qiao's damaged foundations remained, even though he'd reached the echelon of sword intent. It was amazingly impressive that he'd caught Yan Wushi's strike and blocked it, instead of just dying on the spot.

That alone demonstrated that Shen Qiao's aptitude and potential were indeed remarkable. He was able to reach the echelon of sword intent even though he was still reeling from betrayal. No wonder Qi Fengge had chosen this man as his successor.

But although Shen Qiao wasn't dead, he wasn't far from it.

It should have been impossible for him to withstand a direct blow from Yan Wushi's finger, but he'd taken it anyway. On top of that were the injuries he'd suffered during his fight with Yu Ai on Xuandu Mountain—he was well past the point of exhaustion. With all his strength now sapped, he passed out.

Yan Wushi bent down and grasped his chin. Shen Qiao's face was like cold jade, horribly white and dull. Even his lips were bloodless, devoid of all color. It looked like he might stop breathing at any moment.

But ever since his fall from the cliff, he looked like that nine days out of ten. The only difference now was that it looked somewhat more serious.

But within all this bloodless pallor, with his eyes tightly shut and his long eyelashes fanned like feathers, there lingered a trace of frail, ascetic beauty. And now that he was unconscious, it was even meeker and lovelier.

It was precisely this docile appearance that had misled Mu Tipo that day at the inn, when he confused this man-eating flower for a dodder herb.[48]

But this flower was good-natured, always tenderhearted and compassionate. That's why it met with trouble after trouble. It seemed to bring all this trouble on itself, but it also anticipated and accepted the consequences of such tenderness. If others thought that softness was a weakness, then it was they who were truly blind.

"Look at how exhausting and tragic your life is," said Yan Wushi. "Your master is dead, your position as sect leader was stolen. All the martial siblings you grew up with either betrayed you or disapproved of your methods. Your family and friends deserted you, and you were gravely injured, forced to leave Xuandu Mountain. Now you have nothing."

Yan Wushi whispered right by Shen Qiao's ear, coaxing him with his softest tone. "But there's no need to live a life that tragic. As long as you enter the Noble Discipline with me and cultivate the *Fenglin Scriptures*, I

will pass my volume of *Zhuyang Strategy* on to you. When the time comes, you won't just regain your martial arts. It'll be only a matter of time before you progress even further. It'll be far faster than the three or five years it'd take to recover by yourself. After that, whether you want to take back your position as sect leader or kill Yu Ai in revenge, it'll be no trouble at all. What do you think?"

This was the time when Shen Qiao's will was at its weakest. He was dazed, devoid of the strength to resist with his body, and susceptible to invasion of his mind. Yan Wushi had even instilled his words with "Demonic Persuasion," and repeated them in Shen Qiao's ear again and again. They crept straight to his heart, pounding mercilessly at his Daoist Core.[49]

Shen Qiao frowned in pain, and his body struggled a little, but Yan Wushi didn't let go, just repeated his words again.

"Yu Ai allied with Kunye. Because of them, you fell from the cliff and lost all your martial arts. Don't you hate them? Without your martial arts, without your status, even capering clowns like Chen Gong and Mu Tipo dared to make a fool of you. Does your heart really not hold even a whit of hatred, hm? Don't you want to kill them? I can help you with that too."

To a passerby, they'd look like two people intimately murmuring to each other, acting flirtatious and seductive. Of course, it wasn't like that at all.

The force behind Yan Wushi's fingers grew and grew, digging into Shen Qiao's chin until red marks bloomed. They'd probably bruise the next day, but that wasn't why Shen Qiao was suffering. It was those demonic words pouring into his ears over and over. He couldn't escape them, couldn't avoid them.

He clenched his teeth hard, and though he'd already lost consciousness, a thread of his subconscious seemed to bind him firmly, preventing him from saying yes.

The moment he said yes, he would begin to lose his conscience.

"Why not agree?" Yan Wushi coaxed. "It's only a single word. Just say it, and I'll do anything for you."

I don't want to become that kind of person. Even if it must be done, I should be the one to do it.

"Become what kind of person? What's wrong with taking an eye for an eye? If you want to kill someone, then kill them. Besides, they betrayed you first—you don't owe them anything."

Shen Qiao shook his head. A fresh trickle of blood seeped from the corner of his mouth, and the expression on his face grew more and more pained. Any ordinary person would have succumbed to such torture by now, but he refused to speak.

Some people were unaware of the evil in the world and gave their kindness indiscriminately. In the end, all it did was exhaust them and others both. But there were some people who did see through to the evil, and that

insight was precisely why they refused to change—why they carried on being gentle and tenderhearted.

But it was human nature to be evil. Could someone really withstand hundreds upon thousands of trials and hardships, and still not change their mind?

Yan Wushi chuckled quietly, then wiped the blood away from Shen Qiao's mouth. Sweeping his hand beneath Shen Qiao's arm, he lifted him up off the ground and headed into town.

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Chapter 23:
Gentleness

SHEN QIAO FELT LIKE he'd been asleep for a very long time, but he wasn't entirely unconscious in his stupor. He could at least hear when a person spoke loudly into his ear or when the wheels of the carriage rumbled on beneath him. He still held on to some awareness.

Although he was insensate, his true qi never stopped circulating for a moment. The benefits of training with the *Zhuyang Strategy* became apparent now; although he wasn't aware of it, his body was repairing itself, bit by bit.

Though these bodily repairs progressed at a terribly slow speed, by the time Shen Qiao regained consciousness, the stifling pain and desire to vomit had vanished. But after sleeping for so many days, he woke into a trancelike state, as if he'd fallen into a dream. He held his head, expression perplexed.

Looking around, he realized that he was probably inside a carriage. It was stopped, though, and he didn't know where.

Shen Qiao carefully thought back and recalled that he'd fought with Yan Wushi before he fainted. Then Yan Wushi must have brought him away somewhere?

As he was racking his brain, the carriage curtain lifted with a rustle. Shen Qiao looked up automatically.

"Awake?"

This one word set all the hair on Shen Qiao's body on end.

Shen Qiao couldn't claim to have any sort of deep relationship with Yan Wushi, but he did have some understanding of the man's temperament and way of doing things. But now, were it not that his voice and face were unchanged, Shen Qiao would've thought Yan Wushi was possessed by a ghost.

When had the Demon Lord—whose very name inspired dread, who was disagreeable and volatile, who reveled in mocking sarcasm—learned to use such a gentle tone, bone-deep with tenderness?

Shen Qiao hesitated. Then he said, "Sect Leader Yan…did something happen?"

"Your injuries were serious," said Yan Wushi, "and you were unconscious for many days. Fortunately, the *Zhuyang Strategy*'s true qi is working, and it's protecting your vital meridians. After a couple more days of rest, you should be fine. We've just entered Ying Province. I've found us an inn to stay at, come."

He bent at the waist, then picked Shen Qiao up in his arms like a princess.

Shen Qiao was absolutely appalled. He longed to turn and run, but as he'd just woken up from a days-long sleep, he was too weak to struggle. All he could do was go along with it.

Yan Wushi had a gentle smile on his face. Shen Qiao looked like he'd seen a ghost, but Yan Wushi ignored this and carried him on into the inn, and then walked further, the entire way from the lounge to the courtyard, allowing others to crowd around and watch them. Even the inn's concierge kept looking back while he led the way, but Yan Wushi continued on, showing no concern.

"Just to let the two gentlemen know, this isn't just the most beautiful courtyard in our inn but in the entirety of this Ying Province city. Take a look at the potted bonsai, the flowing streams—it's as luxurious as a wealthy family's courtyard. If you want to enjoy some spring scenery, you need not trek to the outskirts and climb the hills. This courtyard has all the spring scenery our city has to offer!"

The concierge was eloquent, with a silver tongue, but Shen Qiao could neither see nor appreciate the beauty he was describing. Though he could guess from the man's attitude that it must have cost a considerable amount to rent this courtyard.

On the other hand, Yan Wushi seemed quite interested. Not only did he let the concierge run through the entire introduction without telling him to shut up, but he even offered a comment or two, which further fueled their

guide's exuberance. He prattled on and on, introducing every little detail of the place.

All this time, Yan Wushi was carrying a grown man in his arms. And yet, he strolled through the courtyard, not flagging in the slightest. The concierge's reverence grew greater all the while.

Shen Qiao sorely needed to rest his aching body. He'd slept for so long and had only been awake for a short while, yet he could already feel the onset of fatigue. He almost fell asleep right there in Yan Wushi's arms.

After a long while, the concierge finally came to his senses and left. Yan Wushi brought Shen Qiao into the sleeping quarters and laid him down on a bamboo cot next to the window.

The cot was covered with a thick, soft, wool blanket. The moment he lay down, Shen Qiao felt his bones groan in comfort.

But Yan Wushi didn't rush to leave. Instead, he sat down right beside him.

"Did Sect Leader Yan rent a courtyard with only one bedroom?" Shen Qiao asked.

Yan Wushi was completely unruffled. "Of course not. But I rented the courtyard, so I can sit wherever I please. You've been unconscious for days, and I've taken care of you for the entire journey. But instead of thanking me, you've been acting all evasive. Was the sect leader of Xuandu Mountain brought up with such rude manners?"

Shen Qiao thought to himself, *My manner is evasive because yours is abnormal*.

He'd only just thought this when Yan Wushi suddenly reached over and straightened his mussed collar. Shen Qiao jolted, this time not even in astonishment but terror.

It was simply unbelievable that he'd gone to sleep and then woken up to Yan Wushi switching personalities entirely.

For the life of him, Shen Qiao couldn't figure out what this man was up to.

"Please stop making fun of me, Sect Leader Yan."

“How can you say I’m making fun of you?” asked Yan Wushi. “Do you know how many Huanyue Sect disciples wish that I’d be this pleasant to them? Let alone others. It’s very rare that I’m this nice to anyone. Most people wouldn’t get this kind of treatment even if they begged for it.”

The corner of Shen Qiao’s mouth twitched.

“Did this humble Shen unintentionally offend Sect Leader Yan in his stupor without realizing? If that’s the case, this Shen will make amends to Sect Leader Yan, and he asks Sect Leader Yan to be generous, to not hold it against a blind man.”

Yan Wushi burst out laughing. “Shen Qiao, oh Shen Qiao. Some have called you honest and generous, but I don’t think that’s necessarily true. What sort of honest man throws around his blindness all the time, just to shut people up?”

Shen Qiao pressed his lips together and said nothing.

Shen Qiao shuddered faintly when Yan Wushi placed three fingers on his pulse. It was unclear if he hadn’t been able to avoid him or if he hadn’t bothered to.

“You still can’t see?”

Shen Qiao nodded. “Perhaps it’s because I exhausted my true qi before passing out. The area around my eyes feels warm, so it will probably take some time yet.”

“No rush,” said Yan Wushi. “There’s still a long way to go to Northern Zhou, and we’ll be taking a carriage for the journey. You can take your time recuperating.”

Shen Qiao frowned. “Northern Zhou?”

“What, you don’t want to go?”

It was a purely rhetorical question.

From their sects, to their pasts, to their personalities, and even their conduct, the two of them had nothing in common. Yan Wushi’s pride was so great that he could never fathom how Shen Qiao remained so calm despite falling into such awful straits. Not to mention, with the way Shen Qiao was being forced to parade through the streets, someone would eventually

recognize him as the former Xuandu Mountain sect leader. That would certainly attract a great deal of gossip.

There would always be someone around to remind Shen Qiao, again and again, of the experiences he'd rather not be reminded of. He'd been the mighty and honored leader of the world's number one Daoist sect, but he'd lost his martial arts and position and was betrayed by his own shidi. Everything he'd protected so carefully had been deemed worthless, and everyone thought his decisions were wrong. Everything he'd believed in since childhood had been overturned.

And, what was worse, he still couldn't see, and day and night made no difference to him at all. In an unfamiliar environment, a few extra steps would be enough to trip him, not to mention the difficulties he ran into with small things like getting up, washing, and dressing himself in the morning.

It was these sorts of everyday details—not facing enemies with only the aid of his hearing—that could weigh someone down with bone-deep frustration.

Yan Wushi found it extremely hard to understand such a defeated mentality, and he had no interest in trying. What interested him was Shen Qiao himself.

Even someone from the jianghu who lost all their martial arts and went from a person who held life and death in their hands to a weakling who other people walked all over would be, at the very least, panicked, anxious, and depressed. That is, if they didn't lose themselves to hysteria.

So how did this person, who looked so gentle and soft, manage to keep his composure at a time like this? Just what was he made of?

Shen Qiao nodded. "I'm afraid I'll drag down Sect Leader Yan's pace on this journey once again. I'm truly sorry."

Yan Wushi had thought Shen Qiao would simply say no or raise objections about going to Northern Zhou. The sheer meekness of his reply caught him by surprise. "You could go back to Xuandu Mountain instead," he said insincerely. "Settle down in Xuandu Town, look for a chance to meet with your martial siblings or elders. Maybe they think differently than Yu Ai, maybe they'll support your return as sect leader."

Though he clearly understood that Yan Wushi's words were meant to get a rise out of him, Shen Qiao shook his head as before and answered his question. "My martial arts aren't good enough yet, and even if I did return, I wouldn't have the face to lead Xuandu Mountain after losing to Kunye. Besides, Yu Ai is already the acting sect leader, so he must have complete control over what the sect says and does. If I go back, I could even be forced to do their bidding. It's better for me to stay far away. Maybe that way, I can see some things more clearly."

Thinking this over, he smiled. "Didn't Sect Leader Yan once say that I was ignorant of everyday things and people's intentions, and that's how I ended up in this situation? You hold an important position in Northern Zhou; if I follow Sect Leader Yan there, I can learn many things, and that will prevent me from making more missteps and repeating the errors of my past. So, this is a blessing for me."

"You're not concerned about Yu Ai working with the Göktürks?" Yan Wushi raised an eyebrow.

Shen Qiao shook his head. "There is something very strange there. I trust that Sect Leader Yan has noticed it too. After Hulugu left in defeat, there's been no news of him for twenty years. Kunye re-entered the jianghu on his master's orders, and I'm certain the reason wasn't as simple as challenging me to a duel. Him working with Yu Ai must have a deeper scheme buried within it as well. I heard that Sect Leader Yan has fought with Kunye. Did your esteemed self find him a reckless person?"

Yan Wushi spoke plainly. "His aptitude isn't bad—given enough time, he might become another Hulugu. He couldn't have defeated me, even with his full strength, but it was obvious he was holding back. I don't know why he didn't put his full effort in, so I toyed with him for several rounds, and it was the same thing every time. Finally, he couldn't take it anymore. He ran back to the Khaganate."

The implication was: if Kunye really was a reckless person, he wouldn't have been able to stomach holding back for so long, for so many rounds, even if he knew he couldn't win.

Shen Qiao frowned a bit in thought.

Many things had started to connect. A vague logic began to make itself known, but so far, this logic remained unclear. It was like an

enormous, confused mass of tangled string. He still couldn't find the end of it, so the overall shape was still bewildering.

He sighed. "It looks like it's just like Sect Leader Yan said. I know very little about the what's going on in the world. I was down in a well, watching the sky, secluded and unmoving. I, too, am responsible for what Yu Ai is doing, though I can't even guess what they're planning."

Yan Wushi sneered. "Where did all this sentimentality come from? One strong man can crush ten skilled ones. If you're strong enough, you can simply slaughter them all. Those people betrayed you, so they must brace themselves for payback. Unless you plan on forgiving them once you understand their intentions?"

Shen Qiao didn't know what to do with this "just kill them" attitude. "According to you, in order for Yu Ai to control Xuandu Mountain, my martial siblings and the elders of Xuandu's Violet Palace must have tacitly approved of his takeover. Even my kindhearted Da-shixiong must also believe that Yu Ai is a hundred times better as a sect leader than I was. Does that mean I'll have to kill them all too? Those people are the pillars of Xuandu Mountain. If they're gone, how much sect would even be left?"

"Even if your martial arts do return, and you regain your position of sect leader, you and those martial siblings of yours can never go back to the way it was in the past," Yan Wushi said, full of malice. "The memory of their betrayal will lodge inside you like a fish bone in your throat, never-changing. And as for them, would they ever truly believe you'd forgiven them?"

As he spoke, he moved closer to Shen Qiao until his warm breath fanned out right between them.

Faintly uncomfortable, Shen Qiao canted his head away. "Everyone holds evil thoughts inside their hearts; the difference lies in whether or not they act on it. Why castigate them for being human?"

But Yan Wushi replied, "Oh? You hold evil thoughts inside your heart too, do you? What are your evil thoughts, pray tell?"

Shen Qiao tried to back away but was arrested by an arm on his waist, forcing him to slightly arch his back.

Without him knowing it was happening, he'd been backed into a corner, his shoulders pressed tightly against the wall. A painting must be hung behind him—he could feel the tube digging painfully into his back.

"A-Qiao, what are your evil thoughts? Let me hear."

Hearing Yan Wushi call him "A-Qiao" sent goosebumps rising all over his body, but before his astonishment could show on his face, Shen Qiao was already bewitched, falling into a trance brought on by that low voice. He opened his mouth to answer.

"I…"

Rap-rap-rap!

From outside came the sound of knocking.

Shen Qiao jolted, coming to his senses at once.

"You used a charm technique?" he asked.

"It's called 'Demonic Persuasion.' Huanyue Sect is one of the three branches of Riyue Sect too—so naturally, whatever Hehuan Sect knows, I know. That little girl Bai Rong's technique is far from perfect. If you hear it a couple more times, you won't fall for her tricks so easily in the future."

Even with his ploy exposed, Yan Wushi didn't show the slightest hint of shame. Instead, his tone was arrogant enough to suggest Shen Qiao should be honored that the venerable Yan Wushi had employed such a technique on him.

Shen Qiao was a modest gentleman; he didn't have it in him to argue against Yan Wushi's sophistry. He was irritated but found it comical too. "So, Sect Leader Yan is saying that I should thank him?"

"Mm," said Yan Wushi. "You should thank me."

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Chapter 24:
The Powers of the World

THE CONCIERGE ENTERED, bowls of food and soup in hand.

"Sir, this is the medicine we brewed according to the prescription you wrote. The kitchen has also prepared some lotus seed syrup and a couple of desserts, for your two honored selves to allay your hunger with. Once it's mealtime, we'll send some other dishes over for the main course."

It should have been a pharmacy's job to fill prescriptions and brew the medicine, but once Yan Wushi offered enough money, practically raining gold down on them from the heavens, the inn took him as the god of wealth and served him diligently. They put all their effort into fawning over him.

Yan Wushi took the bowl of medicine and said to Shen Qiao, "You need to recuperate from your injuries, and medicine will help that process. Here, I'll feed you."

Shen Qiao and the concierge were both rendered speechless.

Here was a face that oozed arrogance and conceit, saying words that came out gentle as water. It was categorically incongruous. The concierge didn't know that they'd just had a confrontation; when he heard Yan Wushi's tone, so tender it practically dripped, he froze.

That gentleman looked a little frail and sickly, but he was still a man. Could the two of them be…cut-sleeves?[50]

The concierge couldn't help but shudder.

Shen Qiao was now truly afraid of Yan Wushi. He had no idea what he was trying to play at.

A mere moment before, Yan Wushi had been trying to force out his evil thoughts using demonic techniques, then in the next moment, in front of this outsider, his attitude had done a one-eighty. The sheer speed of the change was unbelievable.

Yan Wushi ignored both of their reactions and stared unswervingly at Shen Qiao. His tone grew even gentler. “Don’t be afraid, I’ve already cooled the medicine for you by blowing on it. It’s not hot anymore.”

Arduously, Shen Qiao spat out a couple of words. “Sect Leader Ya _”

Then a spoon was stuffed into his mouth, and the medicine’s bitterness exploded across his tongue. Unable to open his mouth, he was forced to swallow the brew. Yan Wushi followed up with spoon after spoon, and in the blink of an eye, he’d fed Shen Qiao half the bowl. The entire time, his gaze was attentive and careful, and he wore a soft smile, as if he looked upon something beloved.

Shen Qiao couldn’t see Yan Wushi’s expression, but the concierge could. He felt all the hair on his body stand straight up. If he lingered in the room, he thought to himself, that cut-sleeve gentleman might even take a liking to *him*, and then tell the boss that he wanted him! *Then* what would he do!

He put the food down in a hurry and smiled apologetically. “Please enjoy the meal, gentlemen. This lowly one will leave now. If your honored selves have need of anything else, just ring the bell again!”

Yan Wushi made a sound in response but didn’t turn his head. The concierge sighed in relief, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and then quickly slipped away.

The moment he left, Yan Wushi shoved the bowl into Shen Qiao’s hands. “Drink it yourself.”

Shen Qiao was speechless once again.

From the smell of it, he gathered that the bowl of medicine was full of herbs that nourished the qi and enriched the blood. But Yan Wushi’s attitude reversals, one after the other, were too bizarre. He had to ask. “Sect Leader Yan, was there something suspicious about that concierge?”

“No.”

“Then why…”

Yan Wushi laughed. “What? Don’t tell me that you got addicted to being fed? You want this venerable one to finish spoon-feeding you the rest

of the bowl?"

Shen Qiao didn't bother replying.

Yan Wushi cupped his chin. "Actually, now that I see you like this, your face isn't too bad. All disciples of the Noble Discipline's three branches practice charm techniques to augment their good looks. If you weren't so sickly all the time, you'd look better than all of them."

Being toyed with like this when he was seriously injured was one thing, since he wasn't able to resist anyway. But at that moment, Shen Qiao was clearheaded. He couldn't help but strain his neck back, brushing Yan Wushi's hand away at the same time.

Yan Wushi let go smoothly and didn't force the issue.

"Have you ever heard of the lip cup?" Yan Wushi asked.

"What's that?" His tone was so serious that Shen Qiao didn't suspect a thing.

Yan Wushi smiled. "When brothels feed their customers mouth-to-mouth, that's called a lip cup. This venerable one can feed you your medicine that way, if you wish."

Shen Qiao was an upright gentleman. He'd always kept himself proper, his heart pure and free of desires. He'd never heard words like these, verging on the obscene. He immediately pressed his lips together and refused to speak, but against his will, a faint flush spread over his stark-white face. It wasn't out of shyness. He was just a little frustrated.

Yan Wushi had gotten his fill of messing around. When he saw Shen Qiao's face change, he burst out laughing. It looked like he found Shen Qiao incredibly amusing.

Shen Qiao's expression took on a touch of outrage.

After that, Yan Wushi seemed to develop some strange proclivities. It was almost like he'd gotten hooked on toying with Shen Qiao. He was always wanting to put on a show in public so that he could watch Shen Qiao's various reactions.

Shen Qiao was good-natured and strong-willed. After the first few times, he could already keep a straight face despite the assorted lewd words and biting comments. And yet, not only did Yan Wushi fail to get bored, he

even redoubled his efforts, as if determined to find Shen Qiao's absolute limit.

Fortunately, although Yan Wushi had asked Shen Qiao to travel with him, he didn't restrict Shen Qiao's freedom. It was, of course, inconvenient for Shen Qiao to go anywhere on his own, so most of the time he stayed obediently inside his room. He'd sit by the window, listening to the rattling of wind and rain, the rustling of the trees and branches, and not give anyone trouble.

But there were occasional exceptions. The inn was large, with many people coming and going, and they weren't only merchants and officials. It was also one of the largest inns in that Ying Province city, so it was a prime location for gathering news. Yan Wushi didn't just choose it because it had the city's most beautiful courtyard.

During this time period, inns and relay stations were divided into public halls and private rooms, and the latter were further separated into large rooms and small rooms. Small rooms were reserved for groups of a few people to discuss private matters, while the large ones were for attracting business, to draw customers to the inn. These larger rooms were categorized according to occupation: scholars, farmers, artisans, merchants,[51] and so forth.

If you were a merchant, you could take the initiative to ask for a private room in an area with mainly merchants. Even if no one knew each other beforehand, they might become acquainted by eating a meal together. Then they could even expand their networks, discuss some business, enjoying their work and meal at the same time. The same held true for scholars and martial artists, and of course there were the merchants who pretended to be scholars. They'd insist on joining in on the scholars' conversations, but mostly they'd end up a laughingstock. In general, people wouldn't jump to embarrass themselves for no reason like that.

Yan Wushi should have counted as a martial artist, but he also had another identity he could use in Ying Province, which was inside Northern Zhou. If he were to broadcast his official position as the Junior Preceptor of the Crown Prince, Ying Province officials would probably crowd around to kiss up to him. But oddly, Yan Wushi chose neither of these. Instead, he selected a room for merchants and brought Shen Qiao there.

By now, Shen Qiao was already used to being in the dark. With Yan Wushi leading the way, he slowly followed behind with his bamboo cane. He didn't need anyone's support, but Yan Wushi insisted on holding his wrist, which made the whole thing look deeply intimate. Since Shen Qiao wasn't able to pull his hand back, he just let Yan Wushi have his way.

Ever since arriving in this Ying Province city, Yan Wushi treated Shen Qiao with the utmost tenderness as long as other people were present.

Nobody around knew the details of their relationship. When they saw the two of them, and especially when they saw the intimate way Yan Wushi looked at him, they simply assumed that Shen Qiao was some kind of kept man. They'd never seen a blind one though, so now when the two of them walked into the merchants' dining room, everyone was greatly interested in the strange sight. Every eye in the room latched onto Shen Qiao.

The two of them sat down at the same table. Yan Wushi declined when the waiter approached, and personally set the bowl and chopsticks before Shen Qiao. Then he took Shen Qiao's hand and showed him where each dish was one by one, describing what food was where. If anyone from Huanyue Sect could see him acting so considerately, they wouldn't dare to say it was really Yan Wushi.

Just a few days ago, Shen Qiao would have been thoroughly uncomfortable. But, given enough time, even goosebumps fade. He accepted the chopsticks without a change in expression, said a word of thanks, then lowered his head and slowly began to try the food.

Seeing that they were acting as if no one was around, the crowd gradually lost interest. After thinking a couple of judgmental comments, they returned to their original topic of conversation.

All the merchants in the room roamed the land extensively. They didn't necessarily know each other, but everyone who ate in this dining room had come there seeking to make connections. And, of course, merchants were resourceful by nature—within a couple of exchanges, the atmosphere became lively once again.

Someone said, "I heard that the Lord of Zhou intends to invade southwards, into Chen. Is it true? If some kind friend here is well informed, please enlighten me. The last few years, this junior has traveled frequently between the north and the south, so I should make preparations early, lest I

lose not only my goods but my life! Goods are a small matter, but lives are a large one!"

Quite a few people heard him speak up, and they immediately echoed, "True, true!"

Another person asked him, "Xu-erlang,[52] where did you get this information?"

Xu-erlang said, "I heard it from my relative. He works in our honored governor's manor doing odd jobs, so it should be reliable."

Another person said, "I've heard the same, so I think that there's a nine out of ten chance it's true. Think about it—ever since His Majesty of Zhou gained his rightful place, he's been very ambitious, and put all his efforts into governance. Nowadays, the south is rich and populous, and Chen's land is vast. If the Emperor of Zhou wants to unify the lands, he absolutely must take Chen first!"

"I disagree!" someone immediately retorted. "Two years ago, during the Northern Expedition of Taijian,[53] Chen allied with Zhou against Qi. This was only a short while ago! You're saying that Zhou will cast aside the alliance and attack Chen instead? If that's true, that's awfully unjust of them—the entire world will hold them in contempt!"

"Ha, what a farce! What's so unjust? We're all businessmen here, and we need to consider how our profits are doing. How much is justice worth? Can you eat it?"

Everyone was talking at once, and a fight was clearly about to erupt. Xu-erlang quickly tried to smooth things over. "Calm down! Everyone, calm down! As businessmen, we must remember that 'amiability is the key to prosperity.' All these military and state issues are for the heavyweights of the world to worry about—what's it got to do with us? We're only concerned about where the fighting will be and when it'll start!"

His interruption relieved the awkward atmosphere of confrontation from the room, and they sat back down to eat and drink.

A casually dressed man in the dining room, southern in appearance, finally broke his silence and spoke up then. "In my opinion, all of your speculation is flawed. If the Lord of Zhou wishes to deploy his troops, his first choice definitely won't be the Chen Dynasty. If you wish to travel back

and forth between Chen and Zhou on business, it should be safe for the time being."

The others asked, "How do you know?"

The man said, "People will always pick the softest persimmon—they'll target the weakest. Qi is much softer than Chen. And if not Qi, then it's the Göktürks. In short, for the moment, the Lord of Zhou won't rush to send his troops out against the Chen Dynasty."

Shen Qiao placed his chopsticks down on the table. He straightened as he listened, his expression one of rapt attention.

He'd once stood at the top of his sect, at the summit of the Daoist discipline, but that had been on the secluded, isolated Xuandu Mountain. Since he'd also never thought to inquire about world affairs, his knowledge was limited—far more so than that of these merchants who roamed so extensively. This particular shortcoming of his had become apparent after he left the sect, as he himself understood very well. So, whenever he heard others discussing affairs of state, he put his all into listening.

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Chapter 25:
Delivering an Invitation

"THE GÖKTÜRKS?" someone asked curiously. "Why would the Lord of Zhou attack the Göktürks? Why ignore the affluent Central Plains in favor of the godforsaken land of the Göktürks?"

The man replied, "While the Central Plains launch nonstop military campaigns, the Göktürk people are expanding in the north as well—they've even defeated the powerful Persian Empire. The kingdoms of the Central Plains are rich in natural resources and full of talented people. Given the Göktürks' ambitions, how could they forgo such a prime target? These days, with Taspar Khagan in power, the Göktürks are stronger than ever. Their arrogance and strength drive their aspirations ever-higher. If they wish to invade the Central Plains, the first to bear the brunt will be Qi and Zhou.

"Compared to Northern Zhou, Qi's power is in decline. They're the perfect target, and the Göktürks are a thorn in their side. If the Lord of Zhou is a wise ruler, he won't pass up these two great opportunities. In comparison, the Chen Dynasty would have to take a back seat. Not to mention that the Great Chen isn't easy pickings. If Yuwen Yong wants to send his troops south into Chen, it won't just happen because he says so. All of you are worrying too much."

"This gentleman does have a point," everyone whispered to one another.

"This gentleman said 'Great Chen'—are you from the Chen Dynasty?" someone then asked.

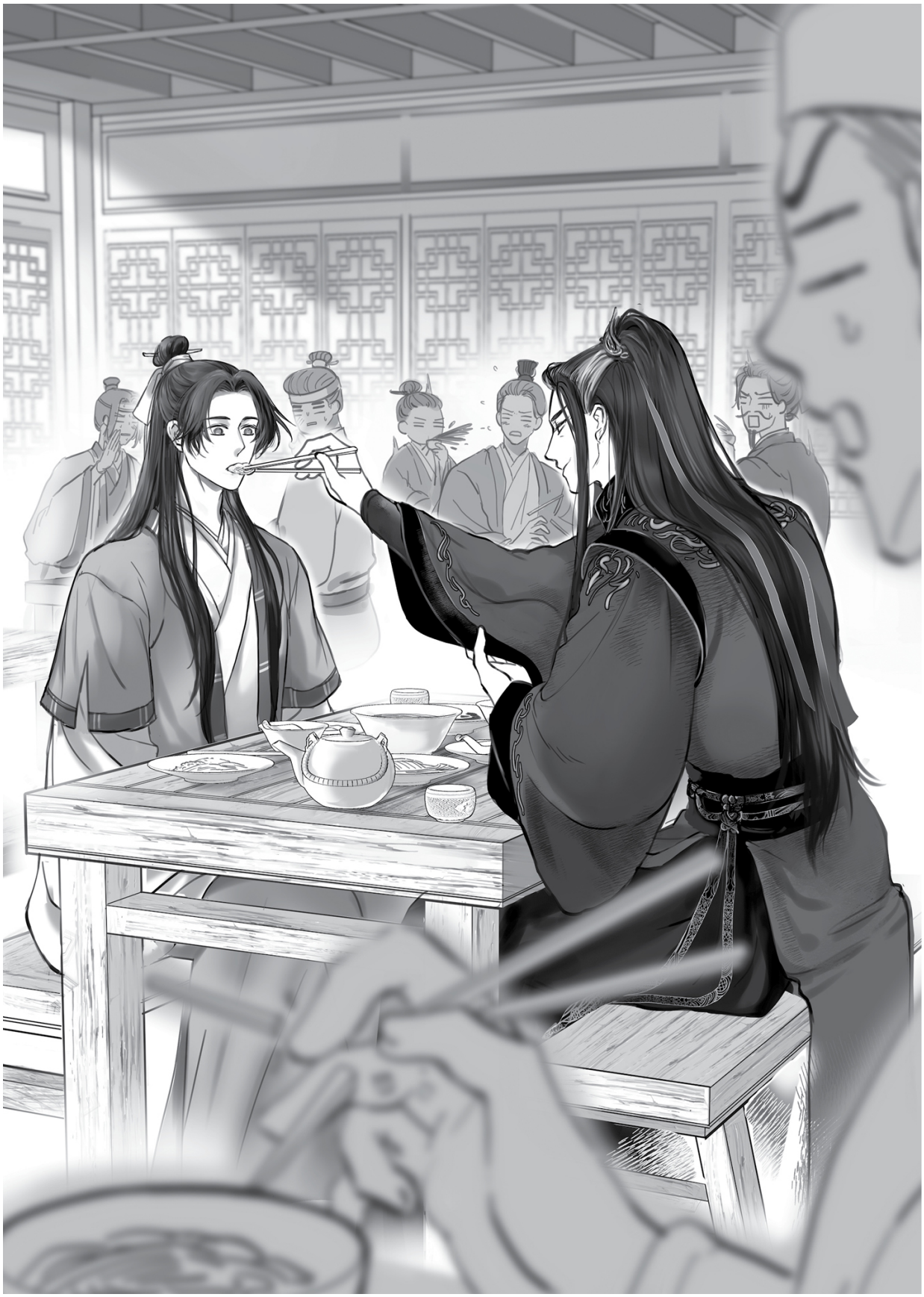
"I am." The man didn't hide it.

Another person said, "This gentleman's manner doesn't seem like that of a typical merchant, but more like a scholar. This is mostly a gathering for merchants, so we fear that we may be unworthy of this gentleman's presence."

The man coughed lightly. "I'm neither a scholar nor a merchant. I'm only here to join in the excitement."

Just before, he'd spoken with ease and confidence, his back as straight as a pine. Everyone here was a well-traveled merchant, so they could certainly tell that his mannerisms were from a powerful noble family. But since the man was unwilling to say anything more, they didn't press him on the topic, and turned instead to Zhou's local customs and practices.

Shen Qiao had been struck by his speech and sank into contemplation. When he returned to himself, he realized that he'd unknowingly opened his mouth to receive the vegetarian goose Yan Wushi was feeding him.



"A-Qiao, is it good?" Yan Wushi asked affectionately.

Shen Qiao was unable to form a reply.

It was too unsightly to spit out what was already in his mouth, so all he could do was swallow arduously, his expression twisting a little.

If Shen Qiao hadn't possessed a fair understanding of him, he would have thought Yan Wushi really did want him for a kept man. But in truth, Yan Wushi was only acting on a whim, for the fun of watching Shen Qiao squirm. It was just like back when he'd incidentally saved Shen Qiao beneath Banbu Peak.

Yan Wushi was nowhere near a good person. He never saved other people for the simple joy of saving them. Someone else might be at ease, thinking that this was the way it should be, that they didn't owe each other anything. But Shen Qiao was gentle and refined in nature, an upright and virtuous man. He did also feel that Yan Wushi had done him a favor, for regardless of what the other man's original intentions were, Shen Qiao had greatly benefited from being saved. So, as long as Yan Wushi didn't do something horrifically immoral, Shen Qiao would let him do as he wished and not hold anything against him.

And it was precisely because Shen Qiao had such character that Yan Wushi wanted to toy with him repeatedly, that he was always trying to get a rise out of him. Every time he caught Shen Qiao getting upset, his mood would grow a few ticks better.

After being tricked once, Shen Qiao absolutely refused to open his mouth when Yan Wushi approached with another spoonful of soup.

Nobody else there knew the details—they only saw one man trying to feed the other who refused, and they took this as confirmation of their relationship. Male cut-sleeves had been common since the Wei and Jin dynasties, so it wasn't anything novel. Merchants themselves were well versed and knowledgeable in the ways of the world, so even though they were a little shocked at how shameless the two were acting in public, they didn't make any fuss.

Shen Qiao had grown much thinner during his illness and had lost much of his presence he'd had as sect leader. When he wasn't angry or severe, he looked like a frail, harmless, and sickly beauty. Yan Wushi didn't

look like someone to be trifled with, but his attitude towards Shen Qiao was careless as he teased him over and over. It certainly didn't look like he was particularly attached to Shen Qiao. And so, one man was inspired to act and went over himself to strike up a conversation.

"Good evening, sir. How should one address you? This one is Zhou Fang, from a merchant family in Longxi. Could he have the pleasure of making your acquaintance?"

Yan Wushi stayed right where he was, sitting. "What is it?" he said lazily.

In Longxi, Zhou Fang was reckoned a wealthy man. He was a bit displeased when Yan Wushi gave him neither his name nor his attention. "Is this one your favorite?" he asked. "I'm willing to purchase him for twenty gold, if your distinguished self is willing to part with him."

Yan Wushi laughed sharply and turned to Shen Qiao. "Look, A-Qiao, you don't need to toil in the jianghu—your face is enough to earn us money! After I sell you to him, I'll find a chance to steal you back and escape, then we'll look for another buyer. In a month we'll be luxuriating in a huge house with beautiful servants in Chang'an!"

Shen Qiao was already used to Yan Wushi's nonsense and didn't bother with him. Instead, he said to Zhou Fang, "Zhou-langjun is mistaken, I'm not a kept man."

The moment he opened his mouth, the atmosphere around him shifted as his presence naturally emerged: slow and sedate, like the wind through a forest. From his tone alone, Zhou Fang knew that he'd truly made a huge miscalculation. There was no way someone like this could ever become a kept man.

"That was rude of me. I ask you not to take it to heart." Zhou Fang replied, a little awkwardly. "May I ask for this gentleman's esteemed name, so I can have the honor of making your acquaintance?"

"This one is Shen Qiao."

"Qiao, as in 'Tall trees rise in the south'?"[54]

"Qiao, as in 'The hundred gods does he placate, the peaks and rivers all come partake.'"

Zhou Fang made a sound of understanding, then offered an embarrassed smile. “That’s rather uncommon. We could call today an example of a ‘friendship forged in the fire of conflict.’ This Zhou asks Shen-langjun to forgive him for his rudeness. I’ll come by another time to make a formal apology at your residence.”

Shen Qiao smiled. “Zhou-langjun is too polite. It’s not necessary to come by. My eyesight is lacking, so I’m afraid I’ll be a poor host to any guests. If we chance to meet again in the future, I will treat Zhou-langjun to a cup of wine.”

Zhou Fang couldn’t argue with Shen Qiao after that. He cupped his hands and spoke a few polite words, then took his leave and departed.

Yan Wushi watched on, greatly amused, not intervening even once. Only after Zhou Fang left did he say, smiling, “A-Qiao, you’re not cute at all. We were so close to getting twenty gold, and it just sprouted wings and flew away.”

He said things like this at least nine or ten times a day. Shen Qiao had long ago gotten used to them and turned a deaf ear.

He was about to get up and return to his room, but Yan Wushi stopped him. “It’s early spring, so flowers are blooming at the outskirts of town. Let’s take a look before going back.”

Yan Wushi usually wasn’t asking for suggestions when he opened his mouth; he was stating his decision.

At present, Shen Qiao was inferior to him in martial arts, but that didn’t mean he had no freedom in their interactions. He shook his head at Yan Wushi’s comment and said, “No, Sect Leader Yan should go on ahead himself. I’ll return to my room.”

But Yan Wushi grabbed him by the wrist, preventing him from leaving. “You’re in your room all day long, doing absolutely nothing! This venerable one is being considerate by taking you out for a break.”

Shen Qiao only stared silently in reply.

He did stay in his room all day, but he wasn’t doing nothing. If he wasn’t meditating and cultivating, then he was mulling over the *Zhuyang Strategy*. So these days, as his body slowly recovered, his martial arts were

also gradually coming back. By now, he'd regained almost half of what he had before his injury. The only trouble was that the *Zhuyang Strategy* was too profound. To this day, he wouldn't dare claim he'd completely comprehended the volume Qi Fengge had passed on to him.

And now he had the Volume of Deluded Thought to contemplate. Outsiders would expect him to be ecstatic over it, this wonderful thing they couldn't have even if they begged. As Shen Qiao pondered it day and night, he became convinced that Tao Hongjing was a great genius. The book's content was abstract and enigmatic—there was no way to understand it within a short time. Since his eyes weren't good anyway, he couldn't walk about in the daytime, so he simply sat in his room and silently pondered. He was still able to glean some truths this way—it was how he entertained himself while sitting idle.

But when Yan Wushi wanted to do something, he didn't leave anyone room to refuse. Shen Qiao was no match for him in a fight, so he let Yan Wushi drag him off.

They'd only taken a few steps when a voice came from behind them. "Please wait a moment, Sect Leader Yan."

They stopped and looked back. Shen Qiao squinted and studied the speaker carefully. Because he'd been injured so often, his health was volatile, and his eyes fluctuated between good and bad. When they were good, he could make out someone's silhouette; when they were bad, the world was pitch black. Lately, he'd recovered a bit, and in the sunlight he could tell from the man's clothes that it was the person who'd spoken with such confidence and poise during their meal just now.

He'd known who Yan Wushi was right off the bat, so it was obvious he came prepared. Perhaps their presence here was the reason he'd appeared at the meal in the first place.

The yellow-robed man approached them step by step, stopped five or six paces away, then bowed and cupped his hands. "Xie Xiang of Linchuan Academy greets Sect Leader Yan."

There was another person with him, a little older than Xie Xiang. "Zhan Ziqian of Linchuan Academy. I hope Sect Leader Yan is well."

Yan Wushi made no comment. His gaze swept over Zhan Ziqian before falling back onto Xie Xiang. “So, you’re Ruyan Kehui’s favorite disciple?”

“I dare not accept Sect Leader Yan’s praise,” said Xie Xiang, “But Academy Master Ruyan is indeed my master.”

“What gave you the idea I was praising you?” Yan Wushi said curiously. “I had one more thing to say: you’re only mediocre.”

The corner of Xie Xiang’s mouth twitched.

Shen Qiao and Zhan Ziqian looked on in awkward silence.

Shen Qiao had a good temper, and on an average day, Yan Wushi would needle at him hundreds of times, so he’d grown accustomed to the cutting sarcasm and was numb to it. But still, he sympathized deeply with the young man before him.

He’d heard Xie Xiang’s name before. He was from Chen Commandery’s Xie family and was Linchuan Academy’s most outstanding disciple of his generation. It was rumored that Ruyan Kehui was grooming Xie Xiang to be his successor and that he’d never fallen short of his master’s expectations. At a young age, he’d already leapt into the top ranks of experts for the new generation. His martial arts had been passed down directly from Ruyan Kehui himself.

It was even rumored that Xie Xiang was on track to surpass his own master when it came to Confucianism. Linchuan Academy often hosted debates, inviting students of Confucianism from all over the world. Xie Xiang always dominated first place. He was usually treated with extra politeness on his master’s merit alone, but Xie Xiang himself was also outstanding, so he’d never been subjected to this kind of taunting before.

If Ruyan Kehui approved of him, then he couldn’t be someone impulsive or easily angered. Displeasure flashed over his face for just a moment before he regained his composure. “The Academy Master ordered this Xie to deliver an invite, asking Sect Leader Yan to meet with him at Chang’an’s Huiyang Building on the fifth of May.”

“If Ruyan Kehui wishes to meet me, then he should come to me himself,” Yan Wushi sneered. “What nonsense is this?”

He turned to leave, but Xie Xiang said severely, “May Xiang have the honor of asking for Sect Leader Yan’s martial guidance?”

Yan Wushi smiled faintly. All of a sudden, he pointed at Shen Qiao. “Would you believe me if I said you couldn’t even defeat him?”

The problem was that Shen Qiao’s appearance was too deceiving. Coupled with the intimate behavior Yan Wushi had demonstrated during the meal, even Xie Xiang had misunderstood. He frowned, not even sparing a glance at Shen Qiao. “Sect Leader Yan is a great man of his generation. Why lower yourself by insulting me with a kept man?”

Shen Qiao had moved some distance away, but now Yan Wushi pulled him back. With a saccharine-sweet voice, he said, “A-Qiao, he’s slandering you. Are you just going to stand there and take it?”

Shen Qiao was speechless.

Why, when he was just standing there, not saying anything, did he still end up dragged into hot water?

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Chapter 26:
Test

DESPITE ALL THE TROUBLE, Shen Qiao still would have liked to meet Xie Xiang, even if Yan Wushi hadn't dragged him into this.

Just from Xie Xiang's words in the hall, where he'd analyzed the world situation, it was clear he wasn't a mere braggart.

"A short time ago, this one was deeply enlightened by your wonderful commentary. May he have the honor of asking for more advice?"

No one disliked being praised. Even if Xie Xiang hadn't formed a good opinion of Shen Qiao, he couldn't very well complain after hearing his kind words. However, he'd wanted to spar with Yan Wushi. To fight the unknown Shen Qiao instead, regardless of whether he won or lost, would be an affront to his dignity. So he said coolly, "Thank you for your praise. This Xie still has his master's orders, so he's afraid he cannot spare the time."

Yan Wushi's voice was chilly. "Didn't you want to fight me? If you can defeat him, I'll fight you."

Linchuan Academy was a Confucian sect, and Ruyan Kehui stood at the pinnacle of the martial arts world, among the top three martial arts masters. As his disciple, Xie Xiang couldn't be too shabby himself.

Until recently, Shen Qiao had spent most of his time on Xuandu Mountain and rarely got involved in secular affairs. To put it nicely, he'd transcended worldly matters. But, to put it uncharitably, Shen Qiao's disregard for the world and its political situation was what first planted the seeds of his betrayal at Xuandu Mountain. Now, as he traveled the mundane world, it was inevitable that he came into contact with all sorts of people. He couldn't recover his former prowess in a day, not after he'd lost half his martial arts, and sitting inside his room and pondering to himself wouldn't make it happen any faster either.

So, although he knew Yan Wushi was trying to stir up trouble, Shen Qiao still tried again. "This Shen is untalented, so he would like to ask for Xie-langjun's guidance."

Xie Xiang knew nothing of Shen Qiao's background. Much less did he know that Shen Qiao's title, status, and martial arts were once all on par with his master. No matter how strong his self-restraint, with Yan Wushi's repeated provocation, Xie Xiang's temper flared.

Angered, he let out a cold laugh. "Fine, I'll give you your guidance!"

He lunged at Shen Qiao. It wasn't some flippant movement—his fingers were crooked, and the attack as quick as lightning. On careful examination, it was an incredibly stunning move: like plum blossoms unfurling or a beauty sprinkling perfume, unfolding in waves. As if a thousand trees had burst into bloom, vibrant and resplendent.

The martial arts of Linchuan Academy were simple and unembellished. They followed the principle that "true ingenuity was unassuming." In fact, the only martial arts technique they had that relied on complexity and speed, and that was capable of dazzling and bewitching the eye, was what Xie Xiang used now: "Destroying Gold and Fracturing Jade." This was the technique Xie Xiang was famous for in the jianghu.

Xie Xiang was sure his strike would land, and he didn't intend for it to be a heavy blow. He only wanted to break Shen Qiao's arm so he wouldn't act so full of himself.

But just as his fingertips were about to brush Shen Qiao's robe, he was left with a handful of empty air.

He made a sound of surprise, then shifted his feet forward and lashed out again.

More empty air!

His two moves were consummately skillful. Even if Shen Qiao had evaded the first by blind luck, he couldn't have escaped the second by the same coincidence.

Xie Xiang wasn't a fool. He realized then that Shen Qiao wasn't the weak pushover he appeared to be. This one wasn't going to fall over with a single touch.

He grew serious, and even drew out his weapon. It was a jade ruler—jade, but of extremely rare quality. Even brighter than red jade, it was so lustrous that it looked on the brink of dripping blood. If he funneled true qi

into this jade ruler and struck someone with it, even their bones would break.

But Xie Xiang was at an impasse—his red ruler didn't hit Shen Qiao. In fact, it couldn't even get close to him. Every time it was about to touch him, an invisible burst of true qi would arrive, sweeping the ruler away.

Xie Xiang was completely focused on vindicating himself. The ruler began to overflow with a dusky light.

Wherever that light touched, violent storms seemed to follow, whistling as they pelted down on Shen Qiao.

Silver arcs shattered the sky, and iron slashes rent apart the ground. The winds swept up by the slashes of the ruler wrapped tightly around Shen Qiao, but they couldn't grasp him directly, only whirl about him, a handsbreadth away.

Xie Xiang was shocked. He thought he'd had an idea of Shen Qiao's strength after watching him dodge his first two moves. He didn't expect that reality would so far exceed his expectations.

Shen Qiao didn't try to see with his blurry eyesight. Instead, he simply closed his eyes and listened.

Xie Xiang sprang gracefully forward and used his ruler to smash through the true qi around Shen Qiao, then leapt into the air and slashed downwards. Shen Qiao's bamboo cane lifted up too, just in time to block the jade ruler.

When the two weapons met, the bamboo cane held fast.

In no time at all, the two of them exchanged dozens of blows.

Zhan Ziqian hadn't taken the fight seriously at first, but now he was starting to worry for his shidi despite himself. As he watched the two exchange blows, he held his breath, afraid to make a single sound lest he throw Xie Xiang off. He did his best to be absolutely quiet, not even to blink.

In contrast, Yan Wushi was completely at ease, standing there relaxed with his hands clasped behind him, pleasure written all over his face. He looked like he was enjoying the show.

Linchuan Academy's martial arts emphasized remaining composed and gracious at all times. But the more Xie Xiang fought, the more vicious his attacks became and the more relentlessly he struck. Even if he'd suffered the occasional setback in the jianghu, all his opponents had been seniors and experts, some of them even grandmasters who ranked in the top ten. Those weren't shameful losses, but the man in front of him wasn't just a nobody, he was a blind nobody!

Xie Xiang couldn't accept a draw, and definitely not a loss.

Both of them were being very cautious. Though they were facing each other in a busy street, they deliberately kept the circle of fighting small. Xie Xiang might have been a bit arrogant, but he wasn't so unscrupulous as to involve the innocent. But after a few hundred moves, as his true qi dissipated, Shen Qiao began to feel like he couldn't keep up. He knew he'd be at more and more of a disadvantage if this dragged on. He slammed the bamboo cane into the ground forcefully, using it to spring upwards. His sleeves unfurled, and like an immortal descending after soaring to the heavens, he dropped down while aiming a palm strike at his opponent.

Xie Xiang followed right after him, striking up with his own palm as he swung his jade ruler in his other hand, aiming directly for Shen Qiao. Their palms met in midair; their bodies reverberated with the shock of impact. Then, simultaneously, they withdrew their true qi and drifted to the ground.

Zhan Ziqian saw Xie Xiang's pale and bloodless face and quickly rushed over to ask after him. "Shidi, are you all right?"

Holding his chest, Xie Xiang frowned and slowly shook his head. When he looked at Shen Qiao again, his expression was completely different from before. "It's my fault for underestimating him."

"Xie-langjun is too modest," said Shen Qiao. "I was wounded too."

"This world has many crouching tigers and hidden dragons, and there are experts concealed in every corner," Xie Xiang said, listless. "I was too full of myself. I shouldn't have spoken so arrogantly."

He ventured another glance at Yan Wushi. "Sect Leader Yan was right. If I can't even defeat one of your people, how could I be qualified to

duel you?"

After saying so, he cupped his hands in obeisance, then turned and left without a second look at Shen Qiao.

Zhan Ziqian tried to call after him, but Xie Xiang didn't turn back, so instead he took off chasing him down the road. A few steps later, something seemed to occur to him. He stopped and turned and cupped his hands politely at Shen Qiao, smiling in apology. Then he was off again, chasing after his shidi.

Shen Qiao's complexion wasn't looking that good either. Xie Xiang was Ruyan Kehui's favorite disciple, the future leader of Linchuan Academy. He wasn't good enough for the top ten yet, but he wasn't far off. Shen Qiao had fought him at half-strength and in poor health—bringing the match to a draw had cost him dearly.

While Xie Xiang's true qi had only been slightly disturbed, Shen Qiao coughed up a mouthful of blood.

Beside him, Yan Wushi sighed. "Looks like we won't be seeing the flowers today!"

As he talked, he picked Shen Qiao up by the waist and walked towards the inn.

Shen Qiao struggled and frowned. "Sect Leader Yan, I can walk by myself…"

"Keep moving around," said Yan Wushi, "and I'll feed you via lip cup once we get back."

Shen Qiao kept his mouth shut.

Sometimes he really felt that Yan Wushi was better suited to being a hoodlum or thug, rather than a sect leader.

Shen Qiao was used to injuries—he'd received one after the other, after all.

Once they got back, he fell into another sleep. When he awoke, it was already pitch-black outside. The faint, warm fragrance of plum blossoms wafted inside the room, the candlelight wavered, and Yan Wushi was nowhere to be found.

He felt around and sat up, put on his shoes, and got off the cot. Heading to the outer room, he rang the bell. He did this entire set of movements with deep familiarity. Anyone not watching closely would never know something was wrong with his eyes.

The sound of knocking swiftly came from outside the door.

After he'd received Shen Qiao's permission, the concierge pushed the door open and smiled attentively. "What order does this gentleman have?"

"What time is it?" asked Shen Qiao.

"It's about half past six in the evening."

"Is there any food left in the kitchen?"

"Yes, of course. What would your honored self like? Just give this lowly one the word. The stove is still on, so we can cook at any time!"

"Then please bring me a bowl of white congee and a few side dishes."

The concierge gave his confirmation, then seeing that he had no other orders, made to leave. But Shen Qiao stopped him: "If it's possible to cook something more complicated, please also bring me a bowl of cat ears and a plate of marinated beef."

"This gentleman is too polite. Whatever the guests need, our inn is prepared to provide for them, all year round. This lowly one will have it made and sent here; please wait a moment!"

Shen Qiao nodded. "Thank you for your trouble."

All the dishes were easy to make. Marinated beef was a cold dish and had been prepared long beforehand; it was ready after some slicing. Freshly kneaded dough was shaped into cat's ears, then placed in a pot, and the congee and side dishes were even simpler. Within half an hour, they brought all the food to the room.

Shen Qiao picked up the white congee and sipped it slowly. He'd only drunk a few mouthfuls when the door opened.

There was no need for him to squint at the newcomer. He could tell who it was simply by the sound of their footsteps.

It was a crisp and cold night. Chilled air blew about Yan Wushi as he walked. He came and sat down at the table.

"Throughout our whole journey your food was simple: clear congee and small dishes were enough for you. Could it be that these cat's ears and marinated beef were prepared for me?"

Shen Qiao's only response was a smile. He had indeed anticipated that Yan Wushi would return soon, and so he'd ordered two additional dishes.

Yan Wushi prodded him. "You and I only became acquainted by chance, like enemies and friends both, and yet you're so attentive down to these finest of details. I'll bet you were even more considerate and gentle towards that Yu-shidi of yours, weren't you?"

Shen Qiao put down his bowl and forced a smile. "Bringing up the most sensitive topics… Sect Leader Yan truly is proficient when it comes to picking other people's scabs."

"I took you for a bronze or iron wall, ignorant and impenetrable, able to remain the same no matter how badly you were betrayed!"

Shen Qiao knew that Yan Wushi was going to start on his philosophy of human nature being evil again, so he simply closed his mouth and spoke no more.

But Yan Wushi seemed to find it amusing that Shen Qiao had prepared him an evening snack. He changed the topic and said, all smiles, "A-Qiao is so tender and attentive! If you ever find someone to love, I'm certain you'd be even more caring. Anyone lucky enough to be loved by you must have spent dozens of lifetimes cultivating their good fortune!"

His use of "A-Qiao" jolted through Shen Qiao like lightning, leaving him numb. He had to say, "Please don't joke around, Sect Leader Yan. The moment I became a Daoist, I resolved to stay unmarried for the rest of my life."

Yan Wushi chuckled and reached out to pet his hair. "Don't you Daoist sects have the concept of Daoist partners?[55] If two people become Daoist partners, they won't need to bother with those secular rituals. Plus, you can't return to Xuandu Mountain now anyway! So why not come with

me to Huanyue Sect? If you're unwilling to be my disciple, I'll give you a different title!"

Shen Qiao's hair stood on end as he listened, and his expression pinched.

Given that Yan Wushi always acted on impulse, that he completely disregarded conventional etiquette, and that he often handled matters in wildly unexpected ways, Shen Qiao couldn't be sure whether he was speaking sincerely or not. He wrinkled his brow and said, "Though Sect Leader Yan shows great generosity…"

The instant he said the words "great generosity," Yan Wushi let out a single mocking laugh. Shen Qiao immediately shut his mouth.

Yan Wushi couldn't hold it in anymore—he finally burst into uproarious laughter. He even clutched his stomach and collapsed against the table, all while mocking Shen Qiao ruthlessly. "Laughing on a full belly is like dessert after a meal! With A-Qiao as seasoning, it's truly too much for me to take!"

By this point, Shen Qiao had of course realized that he'd been made a fool of once again. He pressed his lips firmly together and closed his eyes. No matter what Yan Wushi said, he refused to speak a single word more.

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Chapter 27:
Shen Qiao Strikes

THE JOURNEY TO Ying Province from Chang'an was about the same as the distance it took to travel halfway across Northern Zhou. But with Yan Wushi's qinggong, it was possible to arrive within just two days. Knowing this, when Yan Wushi's first disciple Bian Yanmei received his letter, he immediately ordered Yan Wushi's residence in the capital be made ready so that Yan Wushi could move in upon arriving.

Yan Wushi held no real position in the court, but he was a close confidant of the Emperor of Zhou, so he'd been given the title of Junior Preceptor of the Crown Prince. Ostensibly, this position served the crown prince, but the person in question, Yuwen Yun, had his own learned councilors and his own officials from the Eastern Palace. He had no need to trouble Yan Wushi.

To show how much he valued him, The Emperor of Zhou had even bestowed upon Yan Wushi a residence to live in during his visits to the capital.

Huanyue Sect didn't lack for money, so Yan Wushi had his own residence in Chang'an, and he rarely stayed at the Junior Preceptor's residence. Though it was fully equipped with servants and furnishings, it inevitably became a bit neglected with no master present. So when Yan Wushi said he was returning to the residence, Bian Yanmei rushed to fix the place up.

But after waiting for several days, he still saw no sign of his master. Bian Yanmei found it odd, but with Yan Wushi's abilities, there was no need for real concern—perhaps his master had met some delay on the road. It was just that while he waited, the Emperor of Zhou had summoned Bian Yanmei to the palace again and again, repeatedly asking after Yan Wushi's whereabouts and saying that he wished to see him soon. Bian Yanmei sent several men to wait at the relay stations along the road so he'd hear news of when Yan Wushi might enter the capital.

It wasn't until the third of March—the day of the Maiden's Festival, when all the women left the city to enjoy themselves in the outskirts—that he received some news. The dispatch had been rushed ahead to the city from a relay station in Luo Province. It said that Yan Wushi was expected to arrive in the next two days.

Since Shizun was coming, of course his disciple had to go and greet him. Bian Yanmei cleared his schedule for the next few days and left the city to wait for Yan Wushi himself. Unfortunately for him, as it was the Maiden's Festival, the area was particularly crowded. Not only were the daughters of humble families on their outings, but even the noble daughters of wealthy and aristocratic families had ridden out in carriages. Together with the myriad of servants they'd brought and the merchants traveling back and forth, it was almost as busy as the Lantern Festival. Jostling rivers of people were jammed shoulder to shoulder.

Under these circumstances, Bian Yanmei's martial arts were useless, no matter how skilled he was—unless he wanted to run to his destination by stepping on peoples' heads and carriage roofs. But that would definitely bring down some trouble and probably wouldn't be much faster anyway. So, he simply gave up on his own carriage and walked.

His personal servant, Ji Ying, had followed him for many years. Ji Ying took care of most of Bian Yanmei's daily life in the capital. He was loyal and devoted, with decent skill in martial arts. He'd insisted on coming along with Bian Yanmei on this excursion, and after some consideration, Bian Yanmei had agreed.

They avoided the throngs of people by taking a detour through the alleyways but still spent a good while blocked by carriages at the gates before they could exit the city.

Three kilometers from the city outskirts was a tea shop. Because it was simply furnished, few people stopped there while on their outings. But it had a clear view of anyone entering the city, so Bian Yanmei entered the shop and asked for two cups of tea, then sat down with Ji Ying to wait.

Ji Ying still looked perturbed. "Sir, could we have come too late? What if Master Yan is already inside the city?"

"Unlikely," said Bian Yanmei. "We arrived quite early. It should be fine to wait here a little longer."

Seeing the way Ji Ying was holding his tea cup but not drinking, he couldn't help but laugh. "This isn't your first time meeting Shizun. Why are you so nervous? Shizun won't eat you!"

Ji Ying was inconsolable. "Master Yan punished this lowly one for thoughtlessness last time. He just hopes he won't be punished again this time!"

"Relax," said Bian Yanmei. "If Shizun finds out that you're not a member of Huanyue Sect, you'll only be killed, not punished."

Ji Ying startled. "Sir, this lowly one doesn't understand what you're saying…"

Bian Yanmei smiled thinly. "You've imitated Ji Ying's words and mannerisms very well—you almost could have fooled me. Unfortunately, you've made a grave oversight."

His deception revealed, "Ji Ying" no longer affected a subordinate's reverence. "I ask for your instruction," he said.

"Ji Ying respects and fears Shizun, but his fear is stronger. He would never take the initiative to come with me to greet him. You imitated everything else perfectly but missed this one thing."

The imitation Ji Ying gave a sinister chuckle. "As expected of Yan Wushi's first disciple. But I never intended to keep myself hidden!"

Bian Yanmei's smile faded. "Who are you? Where's Ji Ying?"

"With all your intelligence, can you not figure out who I am?" he said gleefully. "And if you can, then why bother asking after your servant's whereabouts? We're all old nemeses here. You really don't recognize me?"

Bian Yanmei froze for a moment, alarm coloring his expression. "Hehuan Sect? You're Huo Xijing?!"

Huo Xijing's face-changing technique was notorious. If he skinned someone's face off, they didn't survive. Ji Ying knew some martial arts, but he was nowhere near a match for Huo Xijing. Back when Shen Qiao and Chen Gong had encountered Huo Xijing, they could never have escaped if not for Bai Rong's intervention.

No one knew Huo Xijing's actual age. Perhaps he was around thirty or forty, or perhaps fifty, even sixty. Every once in a while, he'd switch to a

new face, and he specifically targeted the young and pretty. His victims numbered in the dozens, if not the hundreds. Whether a sect was orthodox or evil, Huo Xijing's name filled them all with loathing.

Of course, Hehuan Sect was known for their charm techniques and parasitic[56] cultivation, so their reputation wasn't that good to begin with. But people like Huo Xijing inspired a bone-deep loathing, so his reputation was on a different level of terrible.

Huo Xijing burst into laughter. "Why must you look like that, Bian-laodi?[57] Speaking of which, we're basically disciples from the same origin. We haven't had the chance to meet for so many years; I want to catch up with you properly! I didn't come here to kill or fight!"

Coldly, Bian Yanmei replied, "Ji Ying followed me for many years, and you skinned off his face and killed him without a second thought. If I don't avenge him, I'd disgrace my family name!"

Before Bian Yanmei could attack, Huo Xijing took several quick steps back. "Don't misunderstand, Bian-laodi. The day I took a liking to Ji Ying's face, I didn't know he was one of yours. I'd already skinned off half his face before he told me. You see, even if I'd stopped then, he would've lost his face and life anyway. So, might as well give them to me instead. After all, as long as this face is in the world, you'll be able to remember him from time to time. I'm here today on my master's orders to greet yours. He has important matters to discuss."

He placed absolutely no importance on Ji Ying's life and was sure that bringing up Sang Jingxing's name would at least give Bian Yanmei pause. But instead, the other man said nothing at all—he simply attacked. Bian Yanmei clawed at Huo Xijing, his fingers like knives. As if his true qi had solidified, it slashed down with a dense, frigid wind.

Huo Xijing barely managed to avoid it. Only after retreating a dozen or so steps could he find the room to strike back. But Bian Yanmei was in hot pursuit, attacking with severe, forceful moves. In an instant, the tiny tea shop became a battlefield. Countless chairs and tables were reduced to wreckage in their wake. The owner and other guests fled in terror—in just a moment, there was nobody else to be seen.

It was the same Spring Waters finger technique that Yan Wushi used, but Yan Wushi's carried an overwhelming, imperious arrogance, while Bian Yanmei's had a harsher edge. He'd merged Huanyue Sect's blade techniques with the finger technique—he was stronger without a blade than with one. With his spirit like rippling autumn water, but with the momentum of a mountain-splitting blow mighty enough to wash the roads with blood and fill the rivers with corpses, it bore down all around them, leaving not a spot untouched.

Huo Xijing's master was one of the world's top ten: Sang Jingxing. He was shameless in his worship and flattery of his master. He'd even gone as far as presenting Sang Jingxing with a few pretty girls. As he was more or less Sang Jingxing's current favorite disciple, normally, his behavior ran unchecked. If it wasn't for that, all the evil he committed by skinning faces off all day long would've gotten him captured and torn into pieces by his enemies ages ago.

As time went by, he'd grown quite full of himself. He didn't take Bian Yanmei seriously, thinking that this senior disciple of Yan Wushi was mainly responsible for managing the relationship between the Huanyue Sect and the Zhou imperial court, hence he must spend most of his time interacting with court officials, since he even held a government position himself. What with exercising his brain all day, he must have neglected the physical side of things. Surely his martial arts wouldn't be all that incredible.

It turned out that taking his enemy lightly brought him a world of trouble. Even though Bian Yanmei didn't immediately control the fight, Huo Xijing had a hard time gaining the upper hand too.

Bian Yanmei was determined to take Huo Xijing's life; just because they were both from demonic sects didn't mean he'd show any mercy. But Huo Xijing's martial prowess proved an obstacle: the two of them traded hundreds of blows, both sides unable to do anything to the other. Bian Yanmei held a slight advantage, but that was all he managed.

Huo Xijing was getting a bit tired of fighting and started to wonder whether he should keep going or escape. If he kept fighting, perhaps he could find an opening and strike at Bian Yanmei unawares. Then he could use him to threaten Yan Wushi, or even just bring him back and hand him

over to his master. That would earn him some credit too. But since Bian Yanmei was also from a demonic sect, he wasn't the soft, naive type. Catching him off guard wasn't easy, and even after a long bout of fighting, Huo Xijing hadn't found an opening.

At this moment, a voice spoke nonchalantly beside him. "You can't even take down trash like this? How can you call yourself my disciple—Yan Wushi's disciple?"

From that voice, a huge roar seemed to explode in Huo Xijing's ear. His chest shuddered violently, and he almost vomited up blood. Thunderstruck, his face paled. He dropped everything else and tried to retreat.

It was exactly this moment of distraction that gave Bian Yanmei his chance. His palm struck just where Huo Xijing had left himself unprotected, and his opponent yelped as he flew backwards through the air. Yet, in the middle of the air, Huo Xijing performed a flip, trying to use his slipup as a chance to escape!

But just as Huo Xijing made the attempt, his body was brought up short mid-leap—his forward motion was stopped, and he came crashing heavily to the ground.

He held his chest as he gasped, staring wide-eyed at a handsome man in blue who'd appeared beneath a nearby tree.

Beside this man was another person—a sickly-looking man leaning on a cane.

There was no doubt that the man in a blue robe was Yan Wushi.

Huo Xijing was uncommonly obsessed with pretty faces. The moment he saw the man beside Yan Wushi, he recognized him as the one whose face he'd tried to skin that day not so long ago, when Bai Rong had ruined everything.

But at the moment he couldn't bring himself to care, on account of his life hanging in the balance.

"Greetings, Sect Leader Yan. This one is Huo Xijing. His shizun Sang Jingxing ordered him to come and pay respects to you, his esteemed

elder." His situation dire and prepared for the worst, Huo Xijing forced a smile.

All the resentful spirits whose faces he'd skinned probably never imagined there'd come a day when the brutal, arrogant Huo Xijing would act so submissive and soft-spoken.

As the saying went, "there's always a greater evil." At present, Huo Xijing longed to shrink into a ball and bury himself in a crack in the ground. Best if Yan Wushi couldn't see him.

"Your elder? Am I that old?" Yan Wushi asked breezily. His face formed an expression that was like a smile, yet not.

Huo Xijing had been desperately searching for something nice to say that would get Yan Wushi to let him off. Caught off guard by this interruption, he froze and gaped, tongue-tied, unable to force anything else out.

Bian Yanmei smothered his excitement and bowed respectfully. "This disciple greets Shizun. Has Shizun been well these days?"

Yan Wushi spared him a glance. "You've been spending your days dealing with court officials, so you must have neglected your martial arts training. You seriously can't even defeat trash like this?"

Bian Yanmei was ashamed. "Shizun is right to say so!"

Hearing himself referred to as trash, Huo Xijing's face alternated between green and white. Loathing ate away at him, but he dared not speak up.

With Yan Wushi's appearance, he'd given up all hope of gaining the advantage from Bian Yanmei. Right now, his best choice was to run away. Of course, how he could accomplish that was another question. As master and disciple talked, Huo Xijing swept his gaze all around, searching for the best escape route.

He'd killed the servant of Yan Wushi's disciple. Even if the master didn't take revenge, he wasn't going to stop his disciple from doing so. All of them were from demonic sects, so none of them were much more innocent than the rest. Huo Xijing knew there was no way Bian Yanmei

would suddenly decide to show mercy and let him walk away, and as long as Yan Wushi was there, escape was impossible.

Huo Xijing looked around a bit more, and his gaze caught on Shen Qiao, who stood behind Yan Wushi.

A plan came to mind. Straight away, he put it into action with a full-body lunge towards Shen Qiao.

But he quickly realized that, of all the decisions he'd made, this one was the worst.

It happened in less than the blink of an eye, before anyone could react to it. Bian Yanmei didn't know what the relationship between Shen Qiao and Yan Wushi was. When he saw Huo Xijing move, he startled, but since his master didn't move, Bian Yanmei didn't move either.

Huo Xijing moved at full speed; his body practically blurred as he flung himself at Shen Qiao.

Just when he was about to grab his wrist, Shen Qiao swiftly slid away, swift and slippery as a fish.

Huo Xijing's heart thumped, and he rapidly came to understand that things weren't looking good for him. The moment his attack missed, he withdrew and retreated straight away.

He didn't spare Yan Wushi so much as a glance, fearing that even one glance would hinder his escape.

But once again, circumstances outran his expectations. The next person who made his move wasn't Yan Wushi but the man he'd just tried to ambush!

The bamboo cane was green and smooth. Because the end was often braced against the ground, it was slightly frayed. In those days, when scholars climbed mountains, they often bought such bamboo canes from farmers beneath the mountain as a safeguard against exhaustion. Shen Qiao's cane was no different from theirs.

As it struck out, it looked ordinary, unremarkable, and plain, lacking any flashy or impressive technique. But Huo Xijing's face filled with alarm, as from it he felt a dense surge of cold air rushing towards him like the blow

from a blade or an axe, its edge razor-sharp. It burst into sudden motion, rolling in like clouds before a storm.

Only then did Huo Xijing realize that the man he'd taken for a "tender persimmon" was actually a "hot potato!"

But it was too late for regrets. If it were only Shen Qiao, he'd have nothing to fear, but Yan Wushi was standing right there, and that filled him with dread. He couldn't manage the enthusiasm for a long battle—he rushed to retreat. His retreat got him several meters away.

But Shen Qiao chased right after him, his steps so light they looked insubstantial. Yet they were also solid as stone, and he somehow kept a mere handbreadth from Huo Xijing.

Bian Yanmei watched from the sidelines, astonished. Huanyue Sect's footwork paid great attention to agility and beauty. Shen Qiao's footwork bore some similarities to Huanyue Sect's, but there were quite a few differences as well—the likes of the Xiantian eight trigrams[58] and Ziwei Doushu[59] also seemed to be subtly contained within. At first glance, it looked like they were easy to grasp, but on closer inspection there was nothing to them but profound chaos, the type that would require lifelong study.

There seemed to be an issue with this man's eyes. Normally, this would have an obvious clue to his identity, but even as Bian Yanmei racked his brains, he couldn't remember when such an expert had appeared in the jianghu. Then he took another look at his shizun, who looked completely unsurprised. Bian Yanmei had to swallow down his questions and watch the duel unfold.

Shen Qiao was indeed after Huo Xijing's life.

For this man was beyond infamous, his list of crimes endless. As long as he saw someone pretty and pleasing, he'd try to skin off their face and put it on himself. When his bizarre fetish flared up, he could sometimes change faces twice or three times a month. None of the people whose faces he took survived. What was more, Huo Xijing didn't care whether his target was from the jianghu—most of the time, whoever he took a liking to was doomed.

The families of the victims naturally hated Huo Xijing through and through, but with his prowess in martial arts and Hehuan Sect's protection, they couldn't touch him. Those who tried to avenge their family members ended up dead by his hand.

Buddhism had a saying: "dispense a Bodhisattva's compassion with an iron fist," and Daoism also stressed "eliminate evil to promote good." Shen Qiao was gentle by nature and slow to anger. But the moment his temper was aroused, he'd pursue it to the end. At this moment, he'd decided to rid the world of the great evil known as Huo Xijing, so he struck without mercy. His moves were swift and severe, and he was determined to destroy the evil at its root.

Before Shen Qiao's injury, Huo Xijing would never have stood a chance. But Shen Qiao only possessed half his strength now, and his eyesight was lacking. Even though the *Zhuyang Strategy* could cleanse and remove impurities, Joyful Reunion was no normal poison, and it had ravaged his body badly. Residual poison still remained inside him, uncleared. It wasn't something that disappeared just because you wanted it gone.

And so they remained trapped in the fight, neither side able to overwhelm the other.

Huo Xijing would rather not fight Shen Qiao at all. Yan Wushi hadn't made a move, but it felt as if a ferocious beast stood on the sidelines, glaring at its prey. No one could say when he might change his mind and attack. Huo Xijing was anxious to leave, but Shen Qiao refused to let him go. The more Huo Xijing fought, the more panicked he became, desperately wishing that he could just strangle Shen Qiao to death. But he didn't have the ability—all he could do was stay mired, sinking deeper and deeper.

A panicked person would grow distracted and leave openings in their defenses. Shen Qiao was of poor eyesight, but his mind was focused on the enemy. Using his cane as a sword, he attacked his opponent's opening, moving from a feint into a strike, and targeting Huo Xijing right over his heart.

The bamboo cane's movements were deft, skillful, gentle as a lover's caress, but Huo Xijing knew very well that if it hit him, the cane would pierce right through his chest. He gritted his teeth and stopped all forward

movement, folding his body sharply backwards in an attempt to evade Shen Qiao's attack. At the same time, he sent out a palm strike overflowing with true qi. It surged like storm winds, and he was sure that the other man would withdraw.

But Shen Qiao didn't just fail to retreat or dodge to the side, he kept coming with unchecked momentum. He completely ignored Huo Xijing's palm strike and lunged at him head-on. When the palm met him, it passed right through him as if he were incorporeal.

"Body to Shadow, Phase and Replace"? Huo Xijing paled with shock. Wasn't this Qi Fengge's world-famous, specialty technique from all those years ago?!

Before he could react further, a burst of piercing pain radiated from his back.

The pain was beyond unbearable, like a hand was trying to yank his heart straight out of his body. There was nothing Huo Xijing could do but scream.

However, Shen Qiao hadn't skewered him through with the cane. It was like an invisible hand had clamped around it, leaving the bamboo cane unable to advance or retreat in the slightest.

Shen Qiao's expression transformed!

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Chapter 28:
Hehuan Sect Leader

A FRAGRANCE ASSAULTED HIS NOSE, and Shen Qiao wrinkled his brows. Reacting with incredible speed, he let go of the bamboo cane. Another use of "Body to Shadow, Phase and Replace" brought him far away from his original position.

Though it was called "Body to Shadow, Phase and Replace," in truth it was just a highly skilled variant of qinggong. A mere second after Shen Qiao had let go, his bamboo cane exploded into splinters, the shards shooting straight towards him! If he'd removed his hand half a second later, he would have shattered too.

His cane was destroyed, but Shen Qiao didn't hesitate for a moment. His retreat was as swift as a breeze. In an instant he'd returned the tree he'd first stood beneath. At the same time, he raised his sleeves, and the bamboo splinters shooting towards him stopped and fell to the ground one after another, as if they'd hit an invisible barrier.

"Am I so poorly informed about the world? When did such an expert arrive in the jianghu?" A woman in white appeared beside Huo Xijing; the sound of laughter and a fragrant wind came with her.

She was extraordinarily beautiful. With her white robe and sash fluttering in the breeze, she looked like a celestial being who'd stepped out of a painting from some long-ago dynasty. Only her eyes weren't cold—they were flirtatious, alluring, and liquid. Even her voice was soft and lingering, with a sweetness that seeped into the bone. Every listener felt their heart grow lighter at the sound.

But when Bian Yanmei saw this woman, he was far from enchanted. His expression grew even more grim and alarmed.

Huo Xijing was on the ground hacking up blood and thinking his death imminent when suddenly he saw this woman. Unlike Bian Yanmei, he was completely overjoyed, practically ecstatic. “Sect Leader! Sect Leader, save me! They’re trying to kill me!”

He very nearly threw himself over to cling to the woman’s thighs and howl like a drowning man latching onto a life-saving branch. Luckily, his last remaining trace of reason prevailed. He stopped dead mid-step and simply pled incessantly for her help.

She didn’t spare him a glance—her gaze swept over Shen Qiao and Bian Yanmei before finally landing on Yan Wushi. Smiling brightly, she said, “I last saw Yan-lang[60] ten years ago. A decade has passed so quickly, but Yan-lang is still as handsome as he was then, as elegant as ever. This one is truly captivated by you!”

Yan Wushi didn’t respond; Bian Yanmei did. “Huo Xijing just killed my servant. Sect Leader Yuan’s tone makes it sound like you’re pretending that never happened?”

Yuan Xiuxiu’s eyes twinkled, and she smiled sweetly. “Though Huo Xijing is a member of my Hehuan Sect, he operates under Sang Jingxing’s orders and has nothing to do with me. I’m here today because I have matters to discuss with Sect Leader Yan. If Sect Leader Yan agrees, then I might leave Huo Xijing for your lot to deal with. How about that?”

Huo Xijing’s face filled with horror.

“Sect Leader Yuan’s words are so heartless,” Bian Yanmei sneered. “As the saying goes, ‘one night together begets a hundred days devoted.’ Sect Leader Yuan and Sang Jingxing’s relationship is decidedly close, so it’s only right that his disciple should be in your good graces as well. If news gets out that you showed no concern whether he lives or dies, your disciples will be bitterly disappointed.”

Yuan Xiuxiu didn’t bat an eyelid. “If someone else was after his life, of course I wouldn’t hand him over. But if Yan-lang wants him, then of course I must grant him this favor!”

She looked at Yan Wushi, her eyes full of what looked like infinite tenderness and affection. “It’s been ten years, but Yan-lang won’t say even one word to me?”

If any other woman looked at him like that, Bian Yanmei might have really believed there was something between her and his master. But Hehuan Sect came from the same source as Huanyue Sect—Bian Yanmei knew very well that in her every word, even every expression, a charm technique was woven.

But it was one thing to know it, another to witness. Every time Bian Yanmei heard her speak, or even glimpsed her smile, his heart fluttered despite himself. All he could do was avert his eyes and force himself to not look.

“There’s one thing that I’ve wanted to tell you for a long time,” said Yan Wushi.

Yan Xiuxiu’s eyes were bright. “Please go on, Yan-lang.”

“If you want to dress up like a celestial woman, you shouldn’t make expressions that belong on a whore,” said Yan Wushi. “Other men might take to this act, but I find it repulsive. And next time we meet, you should cover your face to avoid spoiling my appetite.”

Bian Yanmei and Shen Qiao were taken aback.

Yuan Xiuxiu was aghast.

Bian Yanmei struggled painfully to hold in his laughter.

Livid, Yuan Xiuxiu glared at Yan Wushi like he was a dead man.

Yet, after a brief moment, a smile reappeared on her face. “Yan-lang is right. I’ll change my dress as soon as I return. Whatever Yan-lang likes, I’ll change into that. Whatever makes you happy.”

Yan Wushi raised his brow. “Ten years, but you haven’t changed in the slightest. The same honeyed mouth and venomous heart.”

Yuan Xiuxiu pretended not to hear. Gently, she said, “Can we go somewhere private, so that I can tell Yan-lang everything in detail?”

“You know, my patience has a limit.”

“Yan-lang’s heart is truly made of iron,” mourned Yuan Xiuxiu. “What kind of woman *can* move your heart, I wonder? Back then I tried every possible method to seduce you, but you refused to spend a single night with me. I almost thought I’d lost my touch with men!” She sighed. “Zhou means to attack Qi. I trust Yan-lang knows already?”

“So what?”

“When Riyue Sect was at the height of their prestige, the likes of Linchuan Academy were nowhere to be found. Yet today, the monkey rules while the tiger is absent—all because our Riyue Sect splintered, and outsiders took advantage. If Huanyue Sect and Hehuan Sect genuinely worked together, then that bald donkey Xueting and the old pedant Ruyan Kehui would be no match for us, would they?”

Yan Wushi gave no answer.

Yuan Xiuxiu was certain that no one else would be able to resist her charm technique. But Yan Wushi was a powerful martial artist, and he was from a demonic sect too. No matter how brilliant her technique was, it was useless against him.

Despite the hate she hid in her heart, Yan Xiuxiu’s affectionate expression didn’t falter. “If Yan-lang will convince the Lord of Zhou not to attack Qi, this one will do anything for you!”

“Then pledge allegiance,” said Yan Wushi.

Yuan Xiuxiu started. “What?”

“I thought you were willing to do anything?” he said. “Do away with the name ‘Hehuan Sect’ and let Huanyue Sect absorb you. Do that, and then I can tell the Emperor of Zhou not to attack Qi.”

Yuan Xiuxiu’s smile dimmed just a little. “Why must Yan-lang be so aggressive? Linchuan Academy has long wished for Zhou and Qi to go to war. Once it happens, Southern Chen will reap all the benefits and pay none of the cost. If you’ll convince the Emperor of Zhou not to attack Qi, I will persuade the Lord of Qi to hand Zhou all the land north of both Heng and Shuo Provinces. Do this, and expanding his territory is a favor the Emperor of Zhou is unlikely to forget. How about it?”

“North of Heng and Shuo Provinces is the Great Wall. If this venerable one recalls correctly, that stretch of land borders the Göktürks’ territory.”

Yuan Xiuxiu still smiled as she said, “To receive such a large area of land without lifting a finger, how could the Lord of Zhou refuse?”

“It’s only a matter of time before Qi is just a fly caught in a web. Why would the Emperor of Zhou forgo the larger prize for a small one? Why covet such minuscule gains?”

He was at his ease, and languid: he answered one statement with one retort. By now, Yuan Xiuxiu finally understood that Yan Wushi had absolutely no intention of cooperating with Hehuan Sect. He was only toying with her.

Her smile vanished completely. “Yan-lang, I never imagined you’d still be so egotistical and conceited. Ten years ago, you were wounded by Cui Youwang. Could it be, now that Cui Youwang is dead, you think yourself number one in the world?”

Yan Wushi said, “I don’t know if I’m number one, but I’m certainly stronger than you. Sometimes I find it strange too. Sang Jingxing is so ambitious, so why hasn’t he replaced you yet? Is he truly content to be your lover?”

Yuan Xiuxiu giggled. “You find it strange? Then why not give it a try yourself? Or maybe you’re one of those men with nothing but their looks going for them—completely useless in bed, like a spear forged from tin!”

It was obvious Yan Wushi had incensed her. Her sleeves were already high and billowing before she finished speaking, then ten slender, transparent needles fired at Yan Wushi and Shen Qiao!

They sped faster than raging squall, almost too quick for the naked eye to see.

Yuan Xiuxiu didn’t believe that the needles alone were enough to injure Yan Wushi. At once, she swept into the air like a specter, two black longswords appearing in her hands. Sword glares erupted and hemmed in Yan Wushi on the left and the right.

Though Hehuan Sect specialized in charm techniques and parasitic cultivation, Yuan Xiuxiu was the sect leader, and her strength was not to be taken lightly. She'd been relegated to the second-to-last position among the top ten martial artists because she was a woman and because she rarely fought in front of outsiders. But her duel against Yan Wushi was enough to prove that her strength was greater than her rank.

That she could exchange dozens of blows with Yan Wushi now and not fall behind was proof enough that Yuan Xiuxiu's strength had been greatly underestimated.

This was a duel between two grandmasters, intense and spectacular. Bian Yanmei knew that there was no way to intervene, but he also refused to give up the chance to witness the fight. He watched, dazzled and entranced, so absorbed that he forgot himself.

Spotting this rare opportunity, Huo Xijing ignored the seriousness of his injuries and decided to beat a hasty retreat.

But he'd only used his qinggong for a few steps when a wind whistled behind him. By the time he tried to twist his body out of the way, he felt a slight chill at his back. Unthinkingly, he looked down.

A blood-splattered branch had skewered him from behind and pierced straight through his heart. Globs of bloody flesh still clung to the tip of the branch—his heart's flesh!

Huo Xijing stared, his eyes bulging. He had on the face of Bian Yanmei's servant, and when he went stiff, it looked incomparably disturbing. He seemed to be in disbelief about dying like this—he wanted to turn around and remember the face of his enemy, but the moment he moved, blood spilled from his mouth. His body collapsed forward onto the ground and lay there, completely still.

Huo Xijing, who'd committed countless evils, who'd been taken for a devil, met his end there, in that very place.

He himself couldn't accept it—his eyes stayed wide open, even in death.

Although Shen Qiao had killed a man, his face showed not a hint of pleasure. He leaned against a nearby trunk and slowly lowered himself to

sit. He didn't go back to watch Yan Wushi and Yuan Xiuxiu's fight, only closed his eyes to rest. And just like that, he simply fell asleep.

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To outsiders who didn't know the full story, it looked like Yuan Xiuxiu had become a sect leader wholly on the basis of her beauty and parasitic practices, not to mention her affair with Sang Jingxing, who used his place as Cui Youwang's disciple to help her secure the position. After that, he willingly lowered himself to take his place as one of the elders of Hehuan Sect, making him her subordinate.

But in reality, anyone who met Yuan Xiuxiu in battle would realize just how wrong all those conjectures were.

There was no way this woman had relied on a man to help her become the leader of Hehuan Sect, where scheming and in-fighting ran rampant, and where the strong thronged thick as trees in a forest.

But Yuan Xiuxiu was happy to cultivate a soft, weak outward image, so she never corrected the public's misconceptions. She just used them to deceive her enemies.

Rumor had it that she and Sang Jingxing were having an affair, that she'd leaned on Sang Jingxing to become sect leader, but Yan Wushi knew that the inner workings of Hehuan Sect were much more complicated. Yuan Xiuxiu and Sang Jingxing only got along in public. Such as now, when Sang Jingxing had ordered Huo Xijing to find Bian Yanmei, they certainly didn't inform Yuan Xiuxiu of the plan. Hence, when Huo Xijing had begged for her help, Yuan Xiuxiu's reaction was lukewarm.

A decade ago, Yan Wushi had dueled her. Back then, he'd managed to take the upper hand, but only barely. And now, a decade later, he was much stronger. But so was she.

The members of Hehuan Sect also cultivated the *Fenglin Scriptures*. Yuan Xiuxiu was certainly not up to Yan Wushi's level there, but she'd scaled great heights nonetheless. Furthermore, back when Riyue Sect had fractured, Hehuan Sect's quick actions netted them a book called the

Hehuan Text. In it were recorded techniques for pair and parasitic cultivation—this was Hehuan Sect's namesake. But few people knew that the *Hehuan Text* didn't only include sexual techniques but also internal cultivation methods and swordplay.

Yuan Xiuxiu carried two swords with her, and her fighting style was evolved from sword techniques that were based on pair cultivation.[61] Originally, they'd required a man and a woman using the moves in tandem to fend off enemies, but Yuan Xiuxiu went the other way and learned both halves of the sword techniques herself.

Such a woman wasn't so easily dealt with.

Facing Yan Wushi, Yuan Xiuxiu didn't dare act reckless. She summoned the full might of the tenth stage against him. Her swords transformed into twin blasts of black light that seemed to swallow the world within them, and at the center of these blasts brewed a windstorm, like a dragon emerging from water. It rolled forth with enormous force, consuming everything in its path, until the sky itself was blotted out. Yan Wushi was totally enveloped.

Bian Yanmei could barely make out the combatants and the moves they made. It was then that he finally realized how conceited he'd been for believing that he himself was a first-rate expert. In truth, there was a summit that lay beyond first-rate—the level of grandmasters. If he didn't work hard, he might never reach it in his lifetime.

Black snow filled the sky, and it seemed as if an army of demons marched in from the east, the piercing cacophony of a hundred soldiers clanging in his ears.

Buffeted by true qi, Bian Yanmei almost lost his footing. He was forced to transform his qi into a shield and retreat several steps. He used to be among those who believed that Yuan Xiuxiu's accomplishments were the work of her beauty and the men under her thumb, but he'd never dare think that again after this.

Few people in the world could hold their own against Yan Wushi, one-on-one.

But each person's struggles are theirs alone. Within the circle of battle, things weren't as effortless for Yuan Xiuxiu as Bian Yanmei

imagined.

She was already bringing to bear all her true qi. Her swords melted from solid to shadow as they left her hands, soaring around and turning substantial wherever she wished, but some sort of invisible gravity was at work around Yan Wushi, and no matter how she attacked, she couldn't break through. In fact, her swords even showed signs of being drawn to him.

When Yan Wushi struck at her with a feather-light palm, Yuan Xiuxiu called for her swords to return to her. But then her opponent somehow avoided the sword screen she'd cast, which she'd been sure was impenetrable. He flashed into view right in front of her. Yuan Xiuxiu grimaced—she had no choice but to meet his attack with her own fair, tender palm.

Their palms met, and amidst the thundering roar, her sword screen suddenly vanished. Yuan Xiuxiu hurriedly retreated, drifting backwards like a kite, swaying in the air like a rootless duckweed, and then landed firmly on the ground eight or nine steps away.

She smiled sweetly, looking as if nothing had happened at all. "Those ten years Yan-lang was in seclusion didn't go to waste! This one was almost halfway to her death in that fight! My little heart is still thumping away even now."

Yan Wushi stayed where he was; he had no plans to pursue her and continue attacking. Of course, if he truly wanted to kill Yuan Xiuxiu he could, but it would take a life-or-death struggle, and he'd be hard pressed to come out unscathed. And, vitally, Huanyue Sect didn't stand to gain if Yuan Xiuxiu died, but the other people of Hehuan Sect did.

Yuan Xiuxiu clearly knew that too, since she didn't hurry to leave.

She swept her gaze over Huo Xijing's corpse, and only then did her expression shift minutely. "You should check with the owner before hitting their dog. Huo Xijing held quite a high position within our sect, and yet Yan-lang's people killed him, just like that?"

Even though Bian Yanmei hadn't personally killed Huo Xijing, he didn't need to show her respect while his master was present. "Huo Xijing killed my servant," he said. "Didn't he deserve to die? Hehuan Sect killed

and injured so many Huanyue Sect members over the years. Would Sect Leader Yuan like to settle all these accounts at once?"

But Yuan Xiuxiu only laughed. "Judging by that, you weren't the one who killed him."

Her moods could change in a flash, and when she took action, she needed only an instant. While chatting and smiling sweetly, before even finishing her sentence, she'd already sped over to Shen Qiao and was reaching for his throat.

Shen Qiao was simply too tired. So tired that he couldn't help falling asleep beneath the tree after killing Huo Xijing.

But, as a martial artist, he still had his intuition and an instinct for danger. When Yuan Xiuxiu struck at him, he perceived it. A normal person would open their eyes first to assess the situation before reacting, but Shen Qiao didn't open his eyes at all. He grabbed the tree trunk straight away and whipped around behind it, using it as a shield.

During that little gap, in the twinkling of an eye, five claw marks appeared on the trunk.

Yuan Xiuxiu didn't slash them into the trunk with her hand—they were from her true qi. But if Shen Qiao had reacted just half a step slower, she'd have clawed through his throat.

Though Shen Qiao had avoided the first strike, he couldn't dodge the second: before he could catch his breath, a palm strike came for him.

Shen Qiao's bamboo cane was already destroyed, leaving him without a weapon. There was no time to escape either—he had to meet the enemy directly. But he was only at half-strength. He'd have been more than a match for some ordinary martial expert, but against a grandmaster like Yuan Xiuxiu, he had no chance of victory.

The moment they met, Shen Qiao immediately fell back. He only came to a stop five steps away when his back slammed into a tree trunk. He looked so pale he was almost blue, and he struggled to swallow down a mouthful of salty-sweet blood.

But even this went far beyond Yuan Xiuxiu's expectations. No matter how loathed Huo Xijing was, he was still a member of Hehuan Sect. As

their sect leader, she had to stand behind him. She'd thought that two moves would be enough to finish off Shen Qiao and hadn't expected him to withstand a direct palm strike at all.

When the third palm strike came, Shen Qiao had nowhere to retreat. He could only close his eyes and wait for death.

Yan Wushi could have stopped Yuan Xiuxiu the first time she attacked him, but he'd watched from the sidelines, unmoved. Shen Qiao didn't expect that it'd be any different this time.

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Chapter 29:
Embrace

YUAN XIUXIU had meant her first strike as a test. If Yan Wushi had stopped her, she would have stopped before a second. But since Yan Wushi hadn't moved, Yuan Xiuxiu concluded that this kept man was of little importance to him. With a giggle, she attacked a third time without holding back in the slightest, preparing to take Shen Qiao's life in exchange for Huo Xijing's.

Only this time, things were different.

Her palm hadn't even touched Shen Qiao when Yuan Xiuxiu's expression transformed. She twisted in midair, folding her body into an almost impossible pose to dodge the finger that came at her from behind.

She didn't hesitate for so much as a second. With her figure as light and dainty as the willow twigs of March, her toes touched down on the branch of a nearby tree, then in a whirl of white robes, she disappeared right before their eyes. All she left behind was a string of delicate laughter, saying, "Yan-lang is so cruel! Then this one will leave for now—let's reminisce about our friendship some other day!"

It wasn't just Shen Qiao who hadn't thought Yan Wushi would protect him—Bian Yanmei thought the same. He didn't dare comment on it, though, he just ran up to ask after Yan Wushi. "Welcome back to Chang'an, Shizun. It was this disciple's incompetence that led to today's events. He deserves your punishment, Shizun!"

Yan Wushi didn't answer; instead, he helped Shen Qiao up. "Are you all right?"

Shen Qiao shook his head without replying. He was too weak to say anything.

Yan Wushi simply picked him up by the waist. By this point, Shen Qiao was half-unconscious, and as he had lost the ability to struggle, he looked especially loose-limbed.

"Let's head back to the city first," Yan Wushi told Bian Yanmei.

Bian Yanmei, meanwhile, grew privately bewildered as he watched Yan Wushi.

When Shen Qiao had appeared with Yan Wushi at the start of all this, he hadn't thought much of it. And then he'd been too engrossed in Yan Wushi and Yuan Xiuxiu's duel to notice when Shen Qiao killed Huo Xijing. Finally, when Yuan Xiuxiu attacked Shen Qiao and he'd seen Yan Wushi standing there unmoved, Bian Yanmei had taken his lead and watched idly from the sidelines.

But the situation hadn't unfolded in the direction he'd expected.

Bian Yanmei was a little confused.

On the road back to the city, he took a chance and asked, "Shizun, how should I address this man?"

"He's Shen Qiao," said Yan Wushi.

Bian Yanmei lowered his head in thought—that name sounded rather familiar.

"He's the sect leader of Xuandu Mountain," Yan Wushi added.

What?!

Bian Yanmei was thrown for a loop all over again. He gave Shen Qiao another once-over, his eyes about ready to pop right out of his skull.

Who was Shen Qiao?

The sect leader of Xuandu Mountain.

And what kind of place was Xuandu Mountain?

The number one Daoist sect in the world.

Even if they'd lost some of their magnificence after they closed off the mountain, it was still the sect that had produced Qi Fengge. Xuandu Mountain's name inspired deep reverence, no matter who heard it.

But since they were that kind of sect…how did their sect leader end up like this, in Shizun's arms?

Bian Yanmei had heard about Shen Qiao falling from the cliff during his appointed duel with Kunye, but he'd been focusing most of his energies

on the court of Northern Zhou at the time. He hadn't gone to watch the battle himself, and though his shidi Yu Shengyan went to Banbu Peak to train, they hadn't had the chance to meet and chat about it, so Bian Yanmei didn't know any of the details.

He coughed politely. "I heard that Shen Qiao inherited Qi Fengge's mantle and is ranked among the top ten in the world. Why couldn't he even take three strikes from Yuan Xiuxiu?"

"Only half of his martial arts are left. Besides, lately I've been keeping him busy at night, so he hasn't been sleeping much. It's natural that he's a bit tired during the day."

He only glossed over the topic, but Bian Yanmei couldn't help but read into it.

What did he mean, "keeping him busy at night," and "hasn't been sleeping much"…

With wording like that, of course he misunderstood.

The actual situation was like this. Yan Wushi had been forcing Shen Qiao to spar with him of late, and in order to wring out Shen Qiao's potential, Yan Wushi never went easy on him. Consequently, Shen Qiao had to use all his energy to meet the challenge, and time and again he was pulled back from the verge of death. Then, during the day, Yan Wushi forced him to discuss martial topics such as demonic cores and Daoist cores. After many days of this, his body couldn't take it anymore, and so he hadn't been able to stop himself from falling asleep after killing Huo Xijing.

Perhaps Yan Wushi had no intention of examining what his disciple was thinking, or perhaps he'd left it ambiguous on purpose. Whatever the case, his words led Bian Yanmei to develop some massive misconceptions. When he looked at Shen Qiao again, it was through a different lens.

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When Shen Qiao woke up, he was already inside the Junior Preceptor's residence. Yan Wushi wasn't there—he'd been called away by

the Emperor of Zhou. But Bian Yanmei had taken a great interest in Shen Qiao and decided to dawdle there a while longer, in no hurry to leave. When the subordinates came to report that Shen Qiao was awake, he went to see him.

That was how Bian Yanmei discovered that a sleeping Shen Qiao and a wide-awake Shen Qiao were completely different.

Unconscious, Shen Qiao looked soft and harmless, like a pushover. Anyone who'd seen him in Yan Wushi's arms like that would have misunderstood their relationship.

Bian Yanmei thoughts had also gone down that path. After the incident, he'd sent some people to look into the story, then combined it with what he'd seen and heard. He easily came to the conclusion that this sect leader of Xuandu Mountain had been gravely injured after losing to Kunye. Lacking the face to return to Xuandu Mountain, and having met Shizun, Shen Qiao put up a token resistance before agreeing to become Shizun's kept man. Thus, he'd gained Shizun's protection. As such a thing was rather dishonorable, he dared not expose his identity to outsiders, and certainly didn't dare to spread word of his circumstances.

But when Bian Yanmei saw Shen Qiao awake and neatly dressed, sitting at the table, he was no longer sure of his conjecture. Because, although the man's complexion was as pale as before, his eyes dull, and his face so pretty it was practically otherworldly, it was very hard to connect him to the image of a kept man who relied on others for his survival.

"Sect Leader Shen has come a long way to be our guest, but I'm afraid that Shizun will be busy for the next few days. You can stay here at the Junior Preceptor's residence. If you have need of anything, just tell the servants."

"Thank you, Bian-xiansheng. I've been a lot of trouble for you."

Bian Yanmei burst out laughing. "Shizun brought you here with him. The Junior Preceptor's residence belongs to Shizun, so this is all part of my job. What trouble is there to speak of?"

He was a little disappointed at the moment, thinking of Qi Fengge's magnificence as the world's number one martial artist and how his disciple had been reduced to a kept man. It was beyond pitiable. If he'd died in

battle back in the beginning, all his troubles would have been over, and he'd leave a tragic and glorious legacy behind. And now he was living such an ignoble existence—how awful was that?

Shen Qiao shook his head. "I killed Huo Xijing because he was bristling with evil, and his sins were unpardonable. The only way I could prevent him from ruining more lives was to stop a killer by killing him myself. But Huo Xijing was a member of Hehuan Sect. I hope it won't complicate things for you."

Bian Yanmei hadn't thought that was what Shen Qiao had been referring to. He froze for a moment, then said, "Hehuan Sect has been at odds with Huanyue Sect for a long time, and Huo Xijing also killed my servant. If anything, I ought to thank Sect Leader Shen for killing him."

Shen Qiao smiled in self-ridicule. "If someone wanted to kill a person, I would normally try to talk them out of doing it—how hypocritical of me. But running into someone like Huo Xijing, I was the one who couldn't restrain myself. Clearly, all the cultivation I'd done for my mind and temperament was just me lying to myself."

His complexion was bloodless and pale, and he looked exhausted. Even his words of self-ridicule sounded mild and meek, and lacked any real heat.

Despite himself, Bian Yanmei felt a trace of pity well up inside him. So he took to comforting Shen Qiao. "Actually, Confucians have this saying too: 'If you repay evil with virtue, how can you repay virtue?' Huo Xijing was absolutely sinister—even though we all came from the Noble Discipline, I had no good feelings towards him. A lot of people would probably thank you for his death!"

The two of them chatted for a while longer before Bian Yanmei noticed how fatigued Shen Qiao looked. Only then did he get up and take his leave.

Once he exited the door and was greeted by the cool wind against his face, he snapped out of it and remembered that when he first went in, he'd looked down on Shen Qiao to some extent. After their conversation, not only was his contempt completely gone, he even felt that Shen Qiao was rather amiable. Bian Yanmei couldn't help but feel close to him.

Shen Qiao had clearly sensed his thoughts, so he'd deliberately brought up Huo Xijing's death. First, to remind Bian Yanmei of the favor he'd done him, and second to let Bian Yanmei know that, although he was staying with his shizun, he wasn't anyone's property.

When he realized this, the last tiny drop of contempt within Bian Yanmei vanished completely, fading away like smoke.

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When Yan Wushi returned, Shen Qiao was playing weiqi in his room.

Having no opponent, he played against himself, holding the white pieces in one hand and black in the other. His eyes were closed, and his fingers felt among the pieces on the board, memorizing the layout.

He made his moves very slowly, spending a long time thinking each one over. But every time he placed a piece, it would sit precisely on an intersection of the grid, without the slightest deviation.

Shen Qiao's martial arts were slowly recovering, but his vision was more erratic: sometimes it was good, other times bad. During the good periods, he could see some blurry shapes. But when it was bad, he was perfectly blind. He'd come to peace with this reality but still needed to prepare and plan for worst, so he trained himself to use his hearing and other senses to perceive the world around him.

Yan Wushi stood at the entrance. He watched him for a long time before entering.

Shen Qiao didn't notice at first, his entire energies focused on the game of weiqi. It was only when Yan Wushi put some of things he'd been holding down on the low table that he opened his eyes a little. He scrutinized the blurred silhouette that came into his line of sight.

"Sect Leader Yan?"

When he was sure of the visitor's identity, Shen Qiao smiled, unbidden.

Yan Wushi said, “I heard that when you were outside today, you encountered Princess Qingdu. You even received her favor?”

Shen Qiao burst out laughing. “I did bump into her, but it didn’t go so far as a favor. The princess is the pride of heaven; I’m only a commoner. Sect Leader Yan must be joking.”

Yan Wushi hadn’t restricted Shen Qiao’s freedom of movement after they arrived in Chang’an, so Shen Qiao could wander about the city as he pleased whenever he wished to do so. That was as far as it went, though. The gate guards had already received Bian Yanmei’s instructions regarding what to do if Shen Qiao tried to leave the city—they’d stop him immediately and report the matter to the residence.

Yan Wushi chuckled. “You may be wrong. I heard that, when you went with Yu Shengyan to Yecheng, you met Han Feng’s daughter. Didn’t you receive her regard too? It’s a pity that Princess Qingdu is the serious type. If she knew you lived at my residence, she’d definitely think you were someone improper, and you’d miss out on a wonderful marriage opportunity. And if you married a princess, you could return to Xuandu Mountain with no trouble at all, couldn’t you? You’d have the power of the court behind you.”

“Is Sect Leader Yan a bit too bored?” Shen Qiao said, helplessly. “I only exchanged a few words with Princess Qingdu. How did you twist it into this?”

Yan Wushi stroked Shen Qiao’s face, his tone frivolous. “Are you taking Princess Qingdu for the daughter of some humble family? Do you think she’d chat up just anyone? You may have lost your martial arts and your status, but you still have this face. Your face alone is enough to attract many admirers. Was Mu Tipo not one? I think that the next time you go out, you should take a lesson from those noble ladies and wear a veil. That way, you won’t run into all these romantic troubles. Otherwise, if word gets out and people say that my kept man is flirting around about town, how could I bear the embarrassment?”

According to Shen Qiao’s understanding of Yan Wushi, this sort of enthusiastic teasing meant one of two things: either his mood was fantastic, or his mood was terrible.

He just didn’t know which one it was today.

Sure enough, he heard Yan Wushi say the next moment, “I have some good news to tell you, along with some bad news. Which one would you like to hear first?”

“Is it good news for me?” asked Shen Qiao. “Or good news for Sect Leader Yan?”

“Of course it’s for you,” said Yan Wushi. “How can you make such malicious assumptions about me? I’m heartbroken.”

As he spoke, he pressed in closer, his voice dropping low and tinged with a hint of flirtatiousness.

No matter how many times this exact situation played out these days, Shen Qiao could never get used to it. He angled his head slightly away, avoiding the warm breath that wafted onto his face.

He might have been able to turn his head away, but his ear was still vulnerable.

The shell and lobe of his ear flushed with a soft layer of pink like a scarlet mark on white jade. Anyone would long to touch it.

And Yan Wushi did exactly that. Shen Qiao had nowhere to hide—he had to raise a hand to block him. With one sitting and the other leaning over, the two of them exchanged dozens of moves in an instant. Unsurprisingly, this ended with Shen Qiao being pulled into Yan Wushi’s arms.

Yan Wushi clicked his tongue. “You’re too skinny. Holding you doesn’t feel good at all.”

He released Shen Qiao and shoved him away.

Shen Qiao didn’t bother with a response.

“Though your hands feel quite nice,” Yan Wushi added.

Shen Qiao’s fingers were long and slender. Because of his illness, they’d become pale and cold and felt quite nice to the touch. Yan Wushi played with Shen Qiao’s hand the way he’d play with a piece of white jade, and in doing so he thawed the chill from it, enclosing it in warmth. Then it was more like handling a piece of warm jade.

Yan Wushi always did as he pleased and never considered anyone else's feelings. He only cared how it made him feel—whether Shen Qiao enjoyed it didn't matter. In fact, if Shen Qiao didn't enjoy it, Yan Wushi would find it quite amusing. Then he'd probably take it even further.

Sure enough, he looked up to see Shen Qiao's expression and laughed. "A-Qiao, are you upset again? I was even going to give you news about Xuandu Mountain. Don't you want to know what it is?"

While Yan Wushi's guard was down, Shen Qiao took the chance to snatch his fingers away, then smoothly pulled his hand back and tucked it into his sleeve, refusing to show another inch of it.

Yan Wushi looked at his sleeve a little sadly before saying, "It's unfortunate you left Xuandu Mountain straight away instead of staying to check out the Jade Terrace Discussion. I heard that Li Qingyu, the disciple of Chunyang Monastery's Yi Pichen, came down their mountain for the first time and immediately defeated that monk Xueting's disciple, Liansheng. He defeated He Siyong from Linchuan Academy as well, and he won against two of Xuandu Mountain's elders. In the end, your Yu-shidi was forced to join the fray. He bested Li Qingyu but only by half a move. The name Li Qingyu of Qingcheng Mountain's Chunyang Monastery shocked the entire audience that day—he shook the world itself."

Shen Qiao's face showed surprise at this news. "Li Qingyu? I've heard that he's Yi Pichen's beloved final disciple, but he's rarely made an appearance in public."

"That's right," said Yan Wushi. "And Xuandu Mountain's Jade Terrace Discussion was the first battle to propel him to fame."

Liansheng and He Siyong were both jianghu experts of the younger generation. They weren't comparable to the world's top ten, but not many people in the rest of the jianghu could match them.

Li Qingyu did lose to Yu Ai in the end, but given Yu Ai's status and seniority, it was an honor, not a disgrace, to lose by half a move.

One had to take into consideration that Yu Ai was Qi Fengge's disciple, and Qi Fengge had been the top martial artist in the world. If Li Qingyu could lose with only half a move's difference, didn't that mean they were already on almost equal footing and that Li Qingyu could soon surpass

Yu Ai? He was very young, and this was his first time leaving his sect's mountain to enter the secular world, yet he'd already achieved so much. Given enough time, who's to say he wouldn't become the new number one martial artist in the world?

Meanwhile, as far as Xuandu Mountain went, first of all, Shen Qiao had fallen to Kunye. Of course, there were extenuating circumstances, but outsiders didn't know the full story, so they just believed that Shen Qiao was unworthy of his name, that his martial arts must have been far inferior to his master's. Then Yu Ai had invited the world's Daoist sects to the Jade Terrace Discussion in order to officially announce Xuandu Mountain's reentry into the secular world, and incidentally to build up Xuandu Mountain's reputation through combat, leaving the public in awe. No one predicted that someone like Li Qingyu would show up at just the wrong time. Not only did the Jade Terrace Discussions not rekindle the public's awe for Xuandu Mountain, it'd established a reputation for Li Qingyu instead.

Which wasn't to say that Xuandu Mountain had fallen to a second or third-rate sect after this, but it could only feel like a calamitous bout of bad luck to Yu Ai and the others. When outsiders mentioned Xuandu Mountain now, it would inevitably be with a bit more delicacy and a bit less reverence.

After all, there was only one Qi Fengge. Xuandu Mountain couldn't return to its former magnificence without him. No wonder he'd sealed off the mountain and made his exit from the secular world—he must have known long ago that the next generation of disciples would be disappointing, so he'd been forced to make this unwise decision.

That was what everyone would think.

Shen Qiao was keen and perceptive. Yan Wushi had barely said anything, but he'd already guessed much of what was going on between the lines.

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Chapter 30:
Attending the Banquet

SHEN QIAO SAID, "I'd heard a while ago that Yi Pichen accepted a disciple in his late years—a gifted genius with incredible foundations, who'd already read and memorized every book in Chunyang Monastery at fifteen years old. But back then, Yi Pichen didn't show him to the public and commanded him to travel the Western Regions' Kunlun Mountains alone. In hindsight, Yi Pichen was indeed prescient. He took ten years to sharpen one sword—its radiance was bound to be unparalleled the moment it was unsheathed!"

"You've always loved being the good guy," Yan Wushi said curiously, "but after this, Xuandu Mountain's title as the number one Daoist sect might have to change hands. Your shidi suffered a huge loss, and your sect was humiliated. But instead of being upset or heartbroken over it, you're heaping praise on Li Qingyu?"

"Yu Ai is conceited and too extreme," said Shen Qiao. "He needed to learn a lesson, it's good for him. How can anything remain number one forever? Life has its ups and downs, and sects are no exception."

Yan Wushi laughed. "Truly a positive thinker."

"Didn't Sect Leader Yan say that there was good news and bad news? What was the good news?"

"I just told you the good news," said Yan Wushi. "Li Qingyu stole the limelight from Xuandu Mountain, and that Yu-shidi of yours was humiliated. Isn't that good news for you?"

Shen Qiao felt like he was nearing the end of his rope. "Then, the bad news?"

"The bad news is, the thing you were worried about finally happened. Yu Ai might truly be in bed with the Göktürks."

Shen Qiao frowned. "How so?"

Yan Wushi deliberately paused for a good while until Shen Qiao couldn't help but lean forward, revealing an eager expression. Only then did Yan Wushi reply, slowly. "Right after the Jade Terrace Discussion, an envoy from Ishbara Khagan ascended Xuandu Mountain and asked them to send a preacher to the Eastern Göktürk Khaganate."

Shen Qiao's brow wrinkled further.

"You know who Ishbara Khagan is?"

Shen Qiao nodded.

He hadn't been wasting all his free time. Besides comprehending the *Zhuyang Strategy*, he'd also been keeping an eye on major world events.

The Göktürk Khaganate held great power in those days, so much so that even Northern Qi and Zhou had to feign politeness and deference when dealing with them. But the Göktürks' political and social system differed greatly from the Han one. Although Taspar Khagan was the Khaganate's supreme ruler, he'd also appointed his nephew and his younger brother to supervise the Eastern and Western Khaganate respectively.

And this Ishbara Khagan of the east was precisely Taspar Khagan's nephew, also known as Shetu.

Rumor said that he was a man of lofty ambitions, no less than his uncle Taspar Khagan, and that he was destined for greatness.

Xuandu Mountain was thousands of kilometers away from the Khaganate, and they hadn't been involved in secular affairs for years. The fact that they'd established a connection to the Göktürks so soon after their return inevitably drew much speculation. Shen Qiao immediately thought of Yu Ai plotting with Kunye to throw him off the cliff.

But how would a close relationship with the Göktürks benefit Xuandu Mountain?

Shen Qiao said, "This is like asking a tiger for its skin."

Yan Wushi chuckled. "Not necessarily. The Göktürks are so powerful, anyone who doesn't want a war is forced to make concessions to them. Didn't the Emperor of Zhou marry a Göktürk empress, after all?"

Shen Qiao shook his head. "The Lord of Zhou seized power back from Yuwen Hu, and he's reigned for many years since then. He must have

seen all kinds of difficult situations. I heard that he intentionally distanced himself from Lady Ashina to avoid being controlled by the Göktürks, so he's clearly a wise man. Yu Ai is clever, but Xuandu Mountain was secluded for too long. And he's overconfident if he thinks he can work with the Göktürks—I fear he'll suffer greatly for it in the end."

Yan Wushi picked up the invitation he'd laid down on the table just before and shoved it into Shen Qiao's hands. "As far as Xuandu Mountain is concerned, you're just an outcast disciple now. Why waste your energy on them? Here's an invitation to a birthday party. I don't have the time to go, but I'm sure you'll be interested."

As the candlelight was dim, Shen Qiao didn't open his eyes to examine it and instead skimmed his hand over the invitation for some time. His fingers were slender and smooth, and using only the faintly raised ink marks on the surface, he read the words "Su Wei."

He tilted his head, dubious. "I don't know this person."

"Su Wei, also known as Su Wuwei," said Yan Wushi. "He's the Duke of Meiyang County and is married to Yuwen Hu's daughter. That should have put him in hot water politically, but he's a talented man. The Emperor of Zhou appreciates talent and wanted to elevate him, but Su Wuwei claimed he was ill and resigned. Now he studies at home. The day after tomorrow is his mother's fiftieth birthday, and even the emperor has sent her gifts of congratulations."

"However," Yan Wushi moved on, "Su Wuwei has a brother named Su Qiao, and that one's a martial artist. Can you guess who his master is?"

Seeing how Shen Qiao was listening with rapt attention, he moved to grab his hand and toy with it again.

But Shen Qiao's guard had been up for some time—he simply put his hands behind his back. After a while, he seemed to realize that this reaction was somewhat childish, so he moved his hands back in front of himself and tucked them into his sleeves instead.

Yan Wushi clicked his tongue. "I'm feeding and housing you, and I'm even bringing you all this news, but you're so stingy! You won't even let me touch your hand!"

Shen Qiao remained unmoved. “There are countless beauties within the residence who’d come to serve you themselves, if Sect Leader Yan wishes.”

“A-Qiao, you’re so boring!”

So Yan Wushi said, but he still went on to tell Shen Qiao, “Su Qiao is from Chunyang Monastery, and he’s the shixiong of the one who lost to Yu Ai by just half a move: Li Qingyu.”

Shen Qiao considered this for a while. “Li Qingyu is well known, and I’ve heard about him before, but I don’t think I’ve heard much of this Su Qiao.”

“He comes from an aristocratic family,” said Yan Wushi. “And above him is Su Wei, who acts like both a father and brother to him. It makes sense that his exploits aren’t as high-profile as Li Qingyu’s. However, since they are martial siblings, and the day after tomorrow is Su Wei and Su Qiao’s mother’s birthday party, Li Qingyu very well might be in attendance. Don’t you want to meet this rising star who singlehandedly took on Xuandu Mountain, and who nearly defeated your shidi?”

Shen Qiao brushed his fingers over the words on the invitation and nodded slightly. “I understand. Thank you, Sect Leader Yan.”

Smiling, Yan Wushi said, “I have no dealings with the Su family, but because of my status, they had to send me an invitation, though they’d never expect me to actually attend. If you go with my invitation, bring a congratulatory gift on my behalf. That should be sufficient courtesy.”

It was rather strange that someone like him would care about courtesy, but Shen Qiao didn’t think too much of it. “All right.”

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Su Wei came from the Su family in the capital, a great and famous clan. His father, Su Chuo, had been an important official in Western Wei, and his wife, Lady Yuwen, was the daughter of Yuwen Hu. Which was to say, Lady Yuwen was the niece of the current Emperor of Zhou. Although

he'd killed Yuwen Hu, he allowed his family to live. He even took good care of this niece.

It was typical in these times for most notable families to marry into the royal family, inextricably linking them together. The Su family was no exception. It was the Su matriarch's birthday, and guests streamed in endlessly for the celebration. Their gates were flooded with horses and carriages, causing a traffic jam. The Su family was forced to specially assign someone to stand by the gates and direct traffic, so as to not hold up any passersby.

Shen Qiao, too, had arrived by carriage. Su Wei, who was still receiving guests inside, became alarmed as soon as the Junior Preceptor's carriage arrived.

Yan Wushi held no actual position within the court, but the Emperor of Zhou placed great trust in Huanyue Sect. It was purportedly Huanyue Sect's support that had enabled him to kill Yuwen Hu and seize back power. Su Wei was the archetypal scholar-official—he wasn't interested in politics, but he also didn't want to make enemies. He'd sent an invitation to Yan Wushi only out of courtesy and hadn't expected someone from the Junior Preceptor's residence to actually attend. When he heard someone had, he hurried to greet the guest personally.

When the man inside the carriage alighted, Su Wei froze for a moment.

Regardless of how little contact he'd had with Yan Wushi, he could still tell that the man before him was definitely *not* Yan Wushi.

"May I ask if your distinguished self is…?"

"This one is Shen Qiao. Sect Leader Yan was summoned by His Majesty and cannot make it tonight, so this Shen came on his behalf to offer congratulations. He asks for Duke Su's forgiveness."

His explanation, taken together with how he'd arrived in the Junior Preceptor's carriage, put Su Wei at ease. The host smiled. "I see. Please come inside, Shen-xiansheng."

Though he'd welcomed the man inside, he was still a bit puzzled.

Yan Wushi was from the jianghu. This Su Wei knew, and he'd also heard from his brother Su Qiao that Huanyue Sect was considered by many to be a demonic sect. But the man in front of him looked like neither a martial artist nor a court official. He looked ill, but his poise was remarkable, almost otherworldly. Could he be a scholar friend of Yan Wushi's?

He wasn't the only one puzzled. Many guests had seen the host personally go out to greet and welcome in a blind man, and they were curious too.

Yan Wushi's name carried thunderous impact within Northern Zhou, but few people had actually met him in person. Many people, seeing Shen Qiao follow Su Wei inside, assumed that he was the leader of Huanyue Sect. But then they saw the famously reserved Princess Qingdu walking up to greet him, and they became even more curious.

Because of Su Qiao, the guests weren't all ministers from powerful families—there were also martial artists from the jianghu.

Chunyang Monastery's leader Yi Pichen hadn't come himself, but he'd sent his disciple, Li Qingyu. He'd caused quite a stir a few days ago at Xuandu Mountain's Jade Terrace Daoist Conference, and everyone had heard of him. Since Chunyang Monastery had the potential to replace Xuandu Mountain, everyone wanted a piece of them, so quite a few people had gathered around him.

As martial brothers, Su Qiao and Li Qingyu got along rather well. Su Qiao introduced Li Qingyu to the Su family's circle, which had connections that went back generations. When Li Qingyu exchanged pleasantries with other martial artists, he pulled Su Qiao over too, helping to raise his shixiong's profile.

Shen Qiao politely declined Princess Qingdu's invitation to sit beside her and sat instead in the seat the host had arranged for him.

As he was representing Yan Wushi, his seat was of course decently situated. The guest sitting beside him noticed that his vision was lacking, so when the maid brought the dishes over, he specifically asked her to move Shen Qiao's portions to his right-hand side, making it easier for him to reach them with his chopsticks.

Shen Qiao expressed his gratitude for the man's kindness. "Thank you, sir. This humble one is Shen Qiao. May he know this gentleman's esteemed name?"

The other party laughed. "It was nothing, just a few extra words. Shen-langjun need not be so polite. This one is of the Puliuru family, first name Jian. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Even though Puliuru Jian was sitting next to Shen Qiao, he asked nothing of his background or identity, nor did he express any curiosity or concerns about Shen Qiao's eyes. He only talked about the host, Su Wei, saying that he was talented and widely renowned, as well as a master of poetry and proficient in law. Admiration and reverence shone through in his words.

When they landed on the topic of poetry and literature, the three schools of thought inevitably entered the conversation. Northern Zhou esteemed Buddhism—previously, when Yuwen Hu had been in power, he'd even appointed the monk Xueting as State Preceptor. Now, with Yuwen Yong on the throne, the tendency towards Buddhism remained, despite his best efforts to remove all traces of Yuwen Hu's influence. It wasn't something that could be wiped away so quickly. Puliuru Jian was a Buddhist, but he also had an interest in Daoism and was tolerant of its ideals. It was clear he hadn't expected Shen Qiao's profound insight into Daoism, and after chatting for a while, they quickly built up a rapport and felt a deep appreciation for each other.

After they'd become acquainted, Princess Qingdu sent another person to invite Shen Qiao over to sit with her. Puliuru Jian teased him. "Few people in the entire capital would be given the honor of the Princess Qingdu humbling herself to make friends with them. If this gets out, they'll all be jealous of you."

"I've embarrassed myself before Puliuru-xiong," said Shen Qiao.

"I heard that Su Wei's brother Su Qiao is from Chunyang Monastery, so there are many members of the jianghu here today. Chunyang Monastery's name likely pulled them in."

"Puliuru-xiong knows these people?"

"I used to admire the carefree lifestyle of the jianghu. I even spent a few years imitating them, wandering around the world on horseback. So I do recognize a couple of faces."

"Then, can Puliuru-xiong introduce them to me?"

"Of course!" Puliuru Jian said brightly.

He then pointed out each to Shen Qiao. "You recognize Su Qiao; the one next to him is Li Qingyu. The two of them together are called the Twin Jades of Qingcheng. Li Qingyu is the more famous one by a bit, though. You must have heard of his impressive exploits a few days ago at Xuandu Mountain. The one speaking to him is Zhangsun Cheng, who comes from Zhongnan Sect. Zhongnan Sect isn't too well known, but Zhangsun Cheng is also from a wealthy family. His marksmanship is superb—there are few who can rival him. And beside Zhangsun-erlang, the one dressed in yellow? He's Dou Yanshan."

A surprised noise escaped Shen Qiao. "The leader of the Liuhe Guild?"

"Precisely."

That night at Chuyun Temple, many factions had tried all sorts of tricks to get their hands on the *Zhuyang Strategy*'s Volume of Deluded Thought. In the end, Yan Wushi took the item the Liuhe Guild had been painstakingly escorting and smashed it into dust. Yun Fuyi and company had heard what Shen Qiao recited, but after they left, how could they guarantee what they'd written was free of mistakes? Yan Wushi had held them in the palm of his hand, his to be toyed with. Dou Yanshan must have hated him down to the bone.

However, when he saw Shen Qiao walk in instead of Yan Wushi, he only sent him a glance and remained in his seat. It looked like he had no intention of coming over to exchange greetings.

Puliuru Jian continued, "Buddhist Master Xueting was once appointed State Preceptor by Yuwen Hu. That's why he and the Su family still share deep relations, even though Yuwen Hu is dead. He usually would have come to offer his congratulations, but for some reason he isn't here yet. He didn't even send a disciple. That's rather odd.

“Also, that man and woman to the side, they’re members of Mount Tai’s Bixia Sect and Fanzhang Province’s Liuli Palace. These two sects have a good relationship with Chunyang Monastery, so that’s likely why they came.

“The rest are nothing special, just insignificant people from ordinary sects. There’s no point getting to know them, so I won’t waste time on them.”

In actuality, there were quite a few famous martial experts from the jianghu among those he hadn’t introduced, but in the eyes of Puliuru Jian, they all became nobodies. “The strong are king” was the rule of the jianghu, and here it was demonstrated to the fullest. Perhaps those people were the big fish back in their little ponds, but Puliuru Jian met people from the upper echelon of Zhou every day, so he thought nothing of the lot.

Shen Qiao took note of every person he’d named. He was far away from them, too far for his poor eyesight, so he couldn’t make out their faces clearly. Instead, he remembered the color of their clothing, as well as their build and manners.

The two of them were talking when another pair of new arrivals came to the door. Shen Qiao thought they looked familiar. After they finished exchanging greetings with the host, they took a look around, and that’s when Shen Qiao’s gaze met theirs.

Xie Xiang startled a little but only nodded. Zhan Ziqian, however, was already walking over. “Shen-langjun! To think that you’re here too!”

Shen Qiao smiled at him. “So, it’s Zhan-xiong. What a coincidence!”

“Truly!” Zhan Ziqian had a good impression of Shen Qiao and wanted to sit beside him for a proper conversation, but then Xie Xiang walked over.

“Shixiong, the host has already assigned us seats. Won’t it be rude if you just sit around randomly?”

Zhan Ziqian paused reluctantly. “It’s a great fortune to run into Shen-langjun here. I have a favor to ask of you. May I ask that Shen-langjun stay after the banquet?”

Shen Qiao had nothing in the slightest to do with Linchuan Academy, and Zhan Ziqian didn't know who he actually was. They'd only met by chance. Shen Qiao really couldn't think of anything this man might ask of him, but he nodded anyway. "All right."

Once the Xie-Zhan duo had left, Puliuru Jian said, "Linchuan Academy dominates Southern Chen. They're self-important and arrogant. You can tell just by looking at that Xie Xiang. Zhou wants to ally with Chen to invade Qi now, so Xie Xiang's company must have come along with the envoy from Chen. But they hold no sway here in Chang'an, so you don't need to show them that much courtesy."

Shen Qiao smiled. "Xie Xiang is a bit prideful, but Zhan Ziqian is much easier to get along with," he replied.

The day they'd dueled, Xie Xiang had taken care to keep the circle of battle as small as possible, so as not to drag in the innocent people on the streets. It was evident that, although he was arrogant, there was no malice in his heart. With this in mind, Shen Qiao didn't mind his arrogance all that much.

While they'd been speaking, the birthday banquet had already begun.

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Chapter 31:
The People of the Jianghu

AT THIS POINT, most of the guests had arrived, and the hall thronged with people, all of exalted status. From the royal family and renowned aristocrats, to the various sects of the jianghu, it was truly a rare gathering. And it was only possible because the two brothers led two completely different lives.

During this era, the culture was quite open. Everyone had their own dinner table, and men and women were allowed to stay in the same room with only a small screen placed in the middle as a symbolic separation. The women's side was being entertained by Su Wei's wife. Su Wei's mother, Madam Qin, sat above them in the hostess's seat. Below her and to either side were the two brothers, Su Wei and Su Qiao. Serving girls streamed in carrying fine wines and exquisite delicacies, and in the space of a moment, lighthearted chatter picked up and drifted everywhere, the guests and hosts both full of good cheer.

Musicians sat in the hall with drums and flutes, while dancer girls in splendid dresses flowed through graceful steps. Shen Qiao couldn't see the dancers clearly, but he could make out their lithe, fluid figures, their robes fluttering as they glided like immortals alighting on earth, with flowers guiding their paths. This kind of dance, holy and pure but with a hint of guileless sensuality, was distinct from the styles that were in fashion in the west. It was also different from the dances of Southern Chen, where the dancers' "heads turned low beneath wide sleeves, jade hairpins adrift in the autumn breeze." Entertained by the refreshing novelty, the guests all cheered and applauded. After a few more rounds of wine, some of the crowd, those with a fondness for dances, began enthusiastically clapping to the beat.

When Puliuru Jian saw that Shen Qiao was quite entertained by the dancing, he took the chance to explain, "This dance music is called 'Little Heaven' and comes from the Kucha. The Kucha people were devout

Buddhists. Once they were gone, their music spread to the Central Plains, so this song also has a Buddhist style to it."

Enlightened by this insight, Shen Qiao laughed. "No wonder their shoulders and midriffs are bare, and they wear so much jewelry. It's the Kucha style!"

Puliuru Jian smiled back. "Precisely."

Just as everyone was relishing the entertainment, a servant hurried into the room. He jogged to Su Wei and whispered something into his ear. Su Wei's expression went flat, and he made a gesture.

With a long, drawn-out note, the dance suddenly stopped, and the music faded. The guests felt they'd been pulled back to their senses and out of a boundless paradise. They all stared at the hosts in confusion.

Su Wei stood and cupped his hands. "The empress heard that it was my mother's birthday and sent someone over especially, with congratulatory gifts. I ask everyone to wait for a moment. After I receive the emissary, I will return to entertain you."

The Empress of Zhou had the last name Ashina—she was a Göktürk, and the emperor had taken her as his wife in order to befriend the Göktürks. Ordinarily, she and the Su family had no dealings with each other, and as the emperor had already sent over gifts for the Su Matriarch's birthday, this event should have had nothing to do with the empress. Yet she'd made a point to send someone there with a gift.

This development left everyone bewildered. They turned to look at each other, at a loss.

But the emissary was from the empress, so the host had to go welcome them. The music stopped, and everyone sat straight-backed in their seats, all looking towards the door.

Su Wei straightened his hem, ready to head out the door, when from beyond it came a bright laugh. "No need to trouble the Duke of Meiyang County. I'll bring myself in!"

Most people in the hall didn't recognize this unfamiliar voice. They just thought the speaker rather rude. Only Shen Qiao furrowed his brows, an unease growing inside him.

In strolled a young man, strong and tall, with a thick beard. Though he wore the dress of the Central Plains, there was a quick, fierce air about him.

His eyes were sharp and spirited, his gaze forceful and aggressive. He didn't look at Su Wei after he entered but rather swept his gaze around the hall.

Other than the martial artists, everyone he looked at felt the need to avert their eyes. They didn't say so, but each of them felt somewhat discomfited.

Puliuru Jian made a sound of surprise, then whispered, "That man has so much vigor and spirit, he must be a Xiantian expert. But how come I've never seen him in Chang'an before?"

"The entire Su family is deeply grateful for Her Majesty's favor. May I ask for your name?" Su Wei said to the newcomer.

The man smiled. "This one is Duan Wenyang. There's no need to be so courteous, Duke of Meiyang County. Your mother's compassion is well known—the empress has heard about it for years. It's just unfortunate that they haven't had the chance to meet. So, when she heard that it was your mother's birthday, she ordered this one to come with a humble gift and express her goodwill."

Su Wei cupped his hands. "We are deeply grateful for the empress's consideration. I hereby pay my respects. As a visitor, you are our guest; if Emissary Duan has some time to spare, why not take a seat?"

Since the man was representing Empress Ashina, Madam Qin and Su Qiao also bowed towards Duan Wenyang from where they sat, behind Su Wei.

But Duan Wenyang laughed abruptly. "I'm not in a hurry to sit down. I have another reason for my visit here today. I wish to consult Madam Qin."

Su Wei's mother was born to a prestigious family and had never been to the Göktürk Khaganate. Duan Wenyang was a Göktürk, so they obviously had nothing to do with each other. What could he consult her about? Su Wei was a bit confused. "Please speak, Emissary Duan."

“Madam Qin,” said Duan Wenyang. “Someone has asked me to send greetings on his behalf. He would like to know if your esteemed self still remembers the person who painstakingly waited for you in the Göktürk royal court thirty years ago.”

Su Wei and Su Qiao were shocked. They couldn’t help but look to their mother.

Madam Qin’s expression remain unchanged. “Young man,” she said kindly, “I’m afraid you’ve mistaken me for someone else.”

Duan Wenyang laughed brightly. “I just knew that Madam Qin wouldn’t admit to it so easily. Would you force me to tell the entire tale in front of everyone here?”

By this point, Su Wei had realized that Duan Wenyang had come in bad faith. “This distinguished gentleman is awfully rude!” he said severely. “Did the empress send you not to deliver gifts but to pick a fight? The Su family has not grievance nor grudge with the empress, and we have no connection to her. So why must she treat my mother so discourteously at her birthday banquet? I will report this matter to His Majesty. Guards! Escort this guest out!”

At his order, the Su family’s servants rushed over to pull Duan Wenyang away, but he only shook his sleeves slightly, and everyone around him fell to the ground.

The seated guests all rose to their feet, staring at Duan Wenyang in shock. Some of them looked displeased and prepared to reprimand him on the host’s behalf.

“How dare you make trouble here?!” Su Qiao said angrily. “Do you take us for a family of pushovers?!”

As he spoke, he prepared to attack.

But Duan Wenyang took a step back and spoke up loudly. “Wait! I have something to say. Once I finish, you can do as you wish. This matter is of extreme importance, and all of you here are honorable people of great virtue and prestige. I ask all of you esteemed guests to also make your own judgments: decide whether I’m only raising ruckus for no reason or if Madam Qin has a guilty conscience!”

Before anyone could make a move, he leapt to continue. “I ask Madam Qin to please return my Shizun’s keepsake!”

Su Qiao was furious. “Göktürk bastard, making unfounded accusations! My mother comes from a prestigious family in Guanzhong, how could she possibly have any connection to you Göktürks? If you don’t explain yourself clearly and restore my mother’s reputation, you won’t be able to leave even if you want to!”

He drew his sword. The blade’s glare overflowed like water, killing intent lurking beneath its surface.

Li Qingyu stepped out from the crowd. “What you eat is your business, but what you say is ours,” he said, his words slow and steady.

“Madam Qin is my shixiong’s mother, so I respect her as if she were my own. If you continue to maliciously slander her, Chunyang Monastery will see this matter through to the end.”

The implication within his words was clear: even if Su Wei didn’t make an official complaint and pursue the matter in court, Chunyang Monastery would still take it upon themselves to make enemies of Duan Wenyang and his master.

It wasn’t too long ago that Li Qingyu had ascended Xuandu Mountain on his own and defeated Liansheng, He Siyong, and others, before losing to Yu Ai by half a move. Chunyang Monastery’s prestige had silently overtaken Xuandu Mountain’s after that. What was more, their leader Yi Pichen was among the top ten, so Li Qingyu’s words carried a lot of weight.

Duan Wenyang was unperturbed. He laughed just as before and said, “You can travel the entire land for a righteous cause; without one, you cannot move a single step. I’ve heard that the Central Plains love their righteousness—that’s why I came here to seek justice. But could it be that today, you refuse to discriminate between green and red or black and white? That you mean to use your influence to intimidate people? Madam Qin denied it categorically, and you listened to her. Why not listen to what I have to say? Madam Qin’s first name is Ning, and her courtesy name is Shuanghan. Am I correct?”

The Su brothers were shaken, their hearts pounded at his words. Knowledge of a maiden name could be explained away, but their mother’s courtesy name was known to very few, and certainly not to Empress Ashina. So how had this random Göktürk come to know of it?

Unflagging, Duan Wenyang began to explain. “Thirty years ago, Qin Shuanghan traveled to the Göktürk Khaganate and became my master’s disciple. One night, by taking advantage of his favor and trust, she stole away my master’s keepsake and took it with her back to the Central Plains. Now my master has commanded me to find this person and ask for the keepsake back. I have searched long and hard ever since I arrived in the Central Plains. In an unexpected turn of events, I had a chance encounter with her in Chang’an. Only then did I realize that Qin Shuanghan, who I

couldn't find anywhere, was the Duke of Meiyang County's mother, Madam Qin!"

He paused to chuckle before going on. "Madam Qin has hidden herself well all these years. Who would have suspected that this Madam Qin, who never leaves the house, used to be the renowned Aisaule outside the Great Wall!"

"Utter nonsense!" cried Su Qiao. "My mother has never been beyond the Wall or to the Khaganate! If you're seeking your martial siblings, look for them yourself. Why besmirch our family name? You think you can push us around so easily?!"

Duan Wenyang raised an eyebrow. "Madam Qin, will you deny the things you've done?" he asked loudly. "If I remember correctly, the ring you wear on your right hand is a holy relic of my people. It's also the keepsake that represents the identity of my master. The ring has an engraving depicting the golden lotus specific to our people. Could this, too, be a coincidence?"

With this incriminating declaration, everyone fell into a confusion. They were compelled to turn and look at Madam Qin's hand.

On her hand was indeed a ring. Its surface was inlaid with crystals, and beneath them was a faint gold pattern. Light flowed over it in a spill of colors; it was a beautiful sight.

Seeing that today's events would be near-impossible to resolve, Su Wei was silently flooded with regret. He wished he'd prevented Duan Wenyang from entering the house in the first place.

"No matter what you intend to do, today is Madam Qin's birthday," said Princess Qingdu severely. "We all came here to sit down happily and celebrate, yet you've chosen to create a disturbance at this time specifically. You even said it was on the empress's orders. If that's the case, then come to the palace with me! We can speak to the empress directly. I am deeply interested in why she would send you to ruin someone else's birthday!"

Duan Wenyang remained calm and unflustered. "The empress sent me to deliver a gift, and I have delivered it, so I've already fulfilled the empress's orders. This current matter is my master's. His Majesty is wise and just. If his respected self were to learn of the ins and outs of this tale,

I'm certain he wouldn't stop me from asking Madam Qin to return what's ours."

He proudly continued, "Furthermore, my master is world-renowned. He has no need to deliberately target Madam Qin!"

"Who's your master?" asked Li Qingyu.

Duan Wenyang smiled faintly. "Hulugu of the Göktürks!"

The attendant crowd fell into an uproar. His words had stunned them beyond belief.

What kind of person was Hulugu? Twenty years ago, he'd fought Qi Fengge, the number one martial artist then. Their duel was famous throughout the land, and people still took great delight in discussing it all these years later. Hulugu had lost and been forced to swear he would not enter the Central Plains for twenty years. And he'd kept his promise. For the next twenty years, he never once set foot in the Central Plains.

Martial artists of Qi Fengge and Hulugu's caliber rarely lost their lives, even in defeat. Though Qi Fengge's prowess was first in the world, Hulugu hadn't been far behind him. Qi Fengge couldn't kill him, so he'd forced him to swear an oath.

Given Yan Wushi's propensities, if *he'd* had the chance to make Hulugu swear an oath, he might have simply told Hulugu to kill himself. Then, they could have avoided all future troubles by pulling up the grass by its roots. But that obviously wasn't Qi Fengge's way of doing things. He'd noticed the Göktürks' ambitions and their designs on the Central Plains, but he also respected Hulugu. They were both grandmasters of their generation, so he'd been unwilling to humiliate his opponent. And hence he'd established the twenty-year covenant.

Twenty years later, Qi Fengge had passed away, and Hulugu never re-entered the Central Plains. Instead, two of his disciples arrived. One was Kunye, who'd defeated Shen Qiao at Banbu Peak. The other paid an abrupt visit to the Su residence and claimed that Su Wei and Su Qiao's mother was Hulugu's disciple.

The first matter was old news. After Shen Qiao had fallen, Xuandu Mountain changed masters. Gradually, people stopped paying attention to the previous leader's whereabouts. Though some still inevitably sighed

when that duel was mentioned, thinking that Qi Fengge had no one left to carry on his legacy.

But this second matter playing out right before their eyes revealed an absolutely earth-shattering secret.

No matter whether it was true or false, Madam Qin's reputation had already been damaged. Su Qiao flew into a rage—without another word, he grabbed his sword, intending to force Duan Wenyang to shut up.

Right at that moment, Madam Qin spoke up from behind the sons who shielded her. "If Hulugu wants his keepsake, why not come get it himself? Why send you instead?"

A confession lay implied in her words: that Duan Wenyang had spoken the truth.

Su Qiao froze and looked back in disbelief. "Mother, you…"

Madam Qin shot him a look. "You what?" she asked calmly. "Do you understand what this keepsake is for? The golden lotus is the symbol of the Göktürks, and it's also the sacred emblem of Zoroastrianism. As long as he had this ring in hand, Hulugu could call for all of the martial experts in Persia, Tuyuhun, Khotan, and Tangut to gather in the Khaganate and support the Göktürk Khagan in invading the Central Plains. Back then, Northern Zhou hadn't even been established, and Eastern and Western Wei were embroiled in endless wars, weakening each other more and more. They couldn't withstand a large-scale invasion from the north—the Göktürks would ravage the Central Plains. I took away the keepsake so that Hulugu could no longer proclaim himself the true successor of Zoroastrianism and call together the experts from beyond the Great Wall. Without this, the Göktürks lost a limb. Tell me, was what I did wrong?"

The two brothers, Su Wei and Su Qiao, had never dreamed that their mother had such a past. Hearing about it now, they were utterly stupefied.

Madam Qin turned back to Duan Wenyang and said, "This ring indeed belonged to Hulugu, and I was also the one who brought it back to the Central Plains. But that was a long time ago. Hulugu never sought it out before, so why send you more than thirty years later?"

Duan Wenyang was perfectly composed. "It was my master's last request before he passed away. As his disciple, I'm obligated to fulfill it for

him."

Madam Qin flinched a little, but she didn't seem surprised. She was silent for a long time, before saying only five words. "So that's why! That's why."

"Since Madam Qin has admitted to it, this should be easy to resolve. Could you please hand over the ring so I can carry out my master's last request?"

After saying so, he seemed to recall something. He looked all around before his gaze finally landed on Shen Qiao, as if he'd just noticed him. "What a coincidence! Sect Leader Shen is here as well. In that case, can I trouble your esteemed self to act as our witness?"

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APPENDIX

Characters and Associated Factions

CHARACTERS AND ASSOCIATED FACTIONS

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

A sizable portion of *Thousand Autumns*' cast are based on real-life historical figures, though they have all been fictionalized to some degree. The names of those with real-life counterparts but without an entry of their own are indicated by **bold text**.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Shen Qiao (沈峤)

Title(s): Sect Leader of Xuandu's Violet Palace

Character Basis: Fictional

As the chosen successor of the legendary Qi Fengge, and the reclusive leader of the land's foremost Daoist sect, Shen Qiao seemed to have it all: first-rate talent, a world-class master, a loving family, and a kind heart devoted completely to the tenets of Daoism. But a duel atop Banbu Peak changed everything for him.

The *qiao* in Shen Qiao's name is a rare character, referring to a tall and precipitous mountain peak. He was named after a verse in "Ode to Zhou: On Tour" (周颂·时迈), recorded in the *Shijing*—a song written in commemoration of King Wu of Zhou. The verse extols how he traveled the land after vanquishing the Shang in 11th century B.C.E. He offered sacrifices to the many gods, including those in the rivers and tallest mountains.

Yan Wushi (晏无师)

Title(s): Huanyue Sect Leader, Junior Preceptor of the Crown Prince of Zhou

Character Basis: Fictional

The egotistical and capricious leader of the demonic Huanyue Sect. A terrifying martial artist who some sources claim was on par with Qi Fengge, Yan Wushi is also ambitious, shrewd, and above all, a committed misanthrope. In Yan Wushi's eyes, there are no good people, only evil people disguised as good people. As far as he's concerned, anyone who thinks otherwise is either a liar or a fool.

Yan Wushi's personal name means "has no master."

XUANDU MOUNTAIN (玄都山)

The world's foremost Daoist sect, located on the border intersection of Northern Qi, Southern Chen, and Northern Zhou. Sect Leader Qi Fengge built their legendary reputation, but despite this prestige and influence, he chose to seclude Xuandu Mountain away from the world, closing its gates and withdrawing from all outside affairs. After his death, his mantle passed to Shen Qiao, who held fast to his shizun's isolationist stance.

Officially, Xuandu Mountain is a location—the actual sect is called Xuandu's Violet Palace (玄都紫府, *xuandu zifu*), named after Taishang Laojun's abode on the mythical Daluo Mountain. *Xuandu* ("black city") refers to Daluo Mountain's immortal realm, while *zifu* ("violet residence") refers to the Bajing Palace supposedly located within it. The sect leader of Xuandu's Violet Palace is known as the *zhangjiao* (掌教), a term more specific to Daoism compared to *zongzhu* (宗主), which is how Yan Wushi is addressed in Chinese.

Qi Fengge (祁凤阁)

Title(s): Sect Leader of Xuandu's Violet Palace, World's Number One Martial Expert

Character Basis: Fictional

The number one martial artist in all the land before his passing and Shen Qiao's master, Qi Fengge is held in high esteem by the entire world to this day. Two decades ago, he won a duel with Hulugu of the Göktürks. In

lieu of a reward for his victory, he made Hulugu swear to stay out of the Central Plains for the next twenty years. He had five disciples in total: Tan Yuanchun, Shen Qiao, Yu Ai, an unnamed fourth disciple, and Gu Hengbo.

Yu Ai (郁蔼)

Title(s): Acting Sect Leader of Xuandu's Violet Palace

Character Basis: Fictional

One of Qi Fengge's disciples and Shen Qiao's shidi, though two years older than him. Originally the closest to Shen Qiao out of all his martial siblings, he quickly took over leadership of Xuandu Mountain after Shen Qiao's disastrous duel, and instituted various sweeping reforms.

HUANYUE SECT (浣月宗)

One of the three demonic sects, established and led by Yan Wushi after the collapse of Riyue Sect. Though wealthy and influential, they tend to keep a low profile, and are the key supporters of Yuwen Yong's rule in Zhou. Like the rest of the demonic sects, their final goal is to reunite the sects of the demonic discipline.

Yu Shengyan (玉生烟)

Character Basis: Fictional

Yan Wushi's newest disciple. A talented but somewhat naive young man who wholeheartedly believes in Yan Wushi's philosophies.

Bian Yanmei (边沿梅)

Character Basis: Fictional

Yan Wushi's first disciple and Yu Shengyan's shixiong. As shrewd as his master, Bian Yanmei juggled both Huanyue Sect logistics and Zhou imperial court duties as Yan Wushi's representative during his master's seclusion.

HEHUAN SECT (合欢宗)

One of three demonic sects born from Riyue Sect's fall, Hehuan Sect specializes in charm techniques and parasitic cultivation, where the practitioner drains qi and energy from their sexual partners to strengthen their own martial arts. Hehuan Sect was established and led by Yuan Xiuxiu, but her lover Sang Jingxing is known to hold great power within it as well. Highly influential in Qi.

Bai Rong (白茸)

Character Basis: Fictional

One of Hehuan Sect's most prominent disciples under Sang Jingxing. Cunning and devious, she grows interested in Shen Qiao after a certain major incident.

Huo Xijing (霍西京)

Character Basis: Fictional

Bai Rong's shixiong, and Sang Jingxing's favorite disciple. Has a disturbing fetish for beautiful faces, and is infamous for his face-skinning technique, where he takes his victim's face to use as his own.

Yuan Xiuxiu (元秀秀)

Title(s): Hehuan Sect Leader

Character Basis: Fictional

The leader of Hehuan Sect, rumored to have gotten her position due to her relationship with Sang Jingxing. During Yan Wushi's ten years of seclusion, she led Hehuan Sect in repeated attempts to annex Huanyue Sect.

RIYUE SECT (日月宗)

The origin of the “Noble Discipline” (demonic discipline to outsiders). Once located in Fenglin Province, it vanished after splintering into three: Huanyue Sect, Hehuan Sect, and Fajing Sect. Their last sect leader was Sang Jingxing’s master, Cui Youwang.

LIUHE GUILD (六合帮)

One of the largest martial arts organizations in the Central Plains, whose reach extends both north and south of the Yangtze River. Led by guild leader Dou Yanshan and deputy leader Yun Fuyi, they deal in all kinds of business, from escort missions to spy work.

Yun Fuyi (云拂衣)

Title(s): Liuhe Guild Deputy Leader

Character Basis: Fictional

The second-in-command of the Liuhe Guild and a talented martial artist. Her name references a poem: “From the **clouds drift** spring rain / on **clothes** they fall yet leave no stain.”

LINCHUAN ACADEMY (临川学宫)

The leading Confucian sect and the main force backing the Emperor of Chen. Their leader is Academy Master Ruyan Kehui, one of the world’s top ten martial artists.

Xie Xiang (谢湘)

Character Basis: Fictional

Academy Master Ruyan Kehui’s favorite disciple, who was sent to Zhou as an envoy. Arrogant but insightful, he has great faith in the Chen Dynasty.

Zhan Ziqian (展子虔)

Character Basis: Historical

Xie Xiang's shixiong, who accompanied him to Zhou.

QI DYNASTY (齐朝)

Also known as Northern Qi, the country occupies the land northeast of the Yangtze River and was founded by Gao Huan. Originally warlike and powerful, the reign of Gao Huan's successors, especially the incompetent and frivolous Gao Wei, has put the kingdom into a steady decline. Its capital is Yecheng (located at the south of modern-day Hebei).

Murong Qin (慕容沁)

Title(s): Murong Patriarch

Character Basis: Fictional

A martial artist from the Qi imperial court, said to be their best. Leads the Murong clan and claims to be a descendant of the Murong royal family from the now-vanquished Yan Dynasty of the Sixteen Kingdoms Period. Murong Xun is his nephew.

Mu Tipo (穆提婆)

Title(s): Prince of Chenyang Commandery

Character Basis: Historical

One of the Three Nobles of Qi alongside **Gao Anagong** and **Han Feng**. A lascivious, sadistic, and hopelessly corrupt official, but also one of Qi's most powerful men, owing to Gao Wei's favor. Has little regard for the lives of the common folk, often making a game of hunting or sexually torturing them.

ZHOU DYNASTY (周朝)

The country that occupies the region northwest of the Yangtze, also known as Northern Zhou. Its capital is Chang'an (now known as Xi'an).

Though it was established by **Yuwen Tai** before his death, for years his nephew **Yuwen Hu** held power as regent, killing off Yuwen Tai's puppet-ruler sons whenever he perceived them as a threat. The third such son, **Yuwen Yong**, managed to feign obedience for years before finally ambushing and killing Yuwen Hu, officially seizing back his imperial authority.

Xueting (雪庭)

Title(s): State Preceptor of Zhou (former)

Character Basis: Fictional

One of the top ten martial artists of the world and a former member of the Buddhist Tiantai Sect. Previously a high-ranking official of Zhou under Yuwen Hu, who honored Buddhism, Xueting now finds himself in an awkward position, given Emperor Yuwen Yong's anti-Buddhist stance.

Puliuru Jian (普六茹坚)

Character Basis: Historical

A well-learned, high-ranking official of Zhou whom Shen Qiao meets at Madam Qin's birthday banquet.

Su Wei (苏威)

Title(s): Duke of Meiyang County

Character Basis: Historical

The current patriarch of the Su family, Su Wei comes from a distinguished line of scholar-officials and is highly talented himself. His younger brother is Su Qiao, and his mother is Madam Qin.

Madam Qin (秦老夫人)

Title(s): Su Matriarch

Character Basis: Fictional

The matriarch of the prominent Su family of Zhou, and mother of the brothers, Su Wei and Su Qiao. Shocking revelations come to light at her birthday banquet.

CHEN DYNASTY (陈朝)

The country south of the Yangtze River, founded by **Chen Baxian**, also called Southern Chen. Unlike Qi and Zhou where most of the upper class are of Xianbei descent, the Chen Dynasty is dominated by the Han. Its capital is Jiankang (modern-day Nanjing), and the current ruler is Emperor **Chen Xu**.

GÖKTÜRK KHAGANATE (突厥)

A powerful Turkic empire north of the Great Wall, led by **Taspar Khagan**. Their people have been at odds with the nations of the Central Plains for years—relations between them are uneasy and tinged with hostility.

Hulugu (狐鹿估)

Character Basis: Fictional

Once the most powerful martial artist of the Göktürk Khaganate, he was defeated by Qi Fengge twenty years ago. Qi Fengge then made him swear not to set foot in the Central Plains.

Kunye (昆邪)

Title(s): Wise King of the Left

Character Basis: Fictional

Hulugu's disciple, and said to the best of the new generation of Göktürk martial artists. *Thousand Autumns* begins when he defeats Shen Qiao and throws him off the cliff at Banbu Peak.

Duan Wenyang (段文鸯)

Character Basis: Fictional

Though ostensibly an emissary for **Empress Ashina** of Zhou, it's clear he came to Northern Zhou in search of *something*. The trail he's following leads him to Madam Qin's birthday banquet.

OTHER CHARACTERS

Characters who aren't associated with a particular faction, regardless of where they live.

Tao Hongjing (陶弘景)

Character Basis: Historical

The legendary creator of the *Zhuyang Strategy*. Before his death, he was known as a great genius and the one true master of martial arts for his success in marrying the principles of all three schools of thought.

Chen Gong (陈恭)

Character Basis: Fictional

A homeless youth who Shen Qiao meets in Funing County. Suspicious, with a harsh personality. He yearns for a better life.

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PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some (as in "de" in the title below) are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names and sounds from the world of *Thousand Autumns*.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NOTE ON SPELLING: Romanized Mandarin Chinese words with identical spelling in pinyin—and even pronunciation—may well have different meanings. These words are more easily differentiated in written Chinese, which uses characters.

CHARACTER NAMES

Qiān Qiū

Qiān, approximately **chee-yen**, but as a single syllable.

Qiū, as in **cho**ke.

Shěn Qiáo

Shěn, as in the second half of ma**son**.

Qiáo, as in **chow**.

Yàn Wúshī

Yàn, as in **yen**.

Wú, as in **oo**.

Shī, a little like **shh**. The **-i** is more of a buzzed continuation for the **sh-** consonant than any equivalent English vowel. See the General Consonants section for more information on the **sh-** consonant.

Qí Fènggé

Qí, as in **chee**se.

Fèng, a little like **fun**, but with the nasal **ng** one would find in so**ng**.

Gé, a little like **guh**.

Bái Róng

Bái, as in **bye**.

Róng, a little like the last part of chape**rone**. See the General Consonants section for more information on the **r-** consonant.

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**eat

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **ds** as in su**ds**

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

ch: very close to **c-**, but with the tongue rolled up to touch the palate.

Zh: very close to **z-**, but with the tongue rolled up to touch the palate.

Sh: very close to **s-**, but with the tongue rolled up to touch the palate. Because of this, it can give the impression of **shh**, but it's a different sound compared to the **x-** consonant.

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

r: partway between the **r** in **r**un and the **s** in mea**s**ure. The tongue should be rolled up to touch the palate.

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di,” where the first is a buzzed continuation for the sh- consonant and the latter a long e sound. Compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **yo-**yo

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

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APPENDIX

Historical Primer

HISTORICAL PERIOD

While not required reading, this section and those after are intended to offer further context for the historical setting of this story, and give insights into the many concepts and terms utilized throughout the novel. Their goal is to provide a starting point for learning more about the rich culture from which these stories were written.

The following segment is intended to give a brief introduction to the major historical events featured in *Thousand Autumns*.

THE JIN DYNASTY

In 266 C.E., at the close of the tumultuous **Three Kingdoms** era, the central plains were finally united under Sima Yan, founder of the **Jin Dynasty**, also known as **Western Jin**. But when Sima Yan passed away in 290 C.E., his son and heir was deemed unfit to rule. Conflict broke out among members of the imperial court who vied for the throne. This became known as the **War of the Eight Princes**, after the eight members of the Sima royal family who were the principal players.

UPRISING OF THE FIVE BARBARIANS AND THE SIXTEEN KINGDOMS PERIOD

Over a period of fifteen years, the repeated clashes and civil wars greatly weakened the Western Jin Dynasty. During this time, most of the royal princes relied on non-Han nomadic minorities to fight for them, in particular Xiongnu and the **Xianbei**. The Han lumped them together with other foreign ethnicities like the Jie, Di, and Qiang, collectively designating them the **Hu**, sometimes translated as "barbarians." As the Jin Dynasty's control over these minority tribes slipped, instances of rebellion combined with local unrest to usher in the **Uprising of the Five Barbarians** in 304 C.E.

Although it began as a revolt spearheaded by the Hu, the Uprising of the Five Barbarians soon led to the complete collapse of Western Jin as its Han upper class fled south of the Yangtze River. This was the mass

southward migration of the Jin referenced in *Thousand Autumns*. When the old capital of Chang'an fell, the new emperor reestablished the seat of government in Jiankang, heralding the start of the **Eastern Jin Dynasty**. At the same time, north of the Yangtze River, the Di, Qiang, Xiongnu, and Jie each established their own dynastic kingdoms. Thus began a time of great upheaval known as the **Sixteen Kingdoms** period.

During the turmoil of the Sixteen Kingdoms, regimes formed and collapsed in the blink of an eye as they warred with each other and the Eastern Jin. The strife finally abated when the **Northern Wei Dynasty** conquered the other northern kingdoms in 439 C.E. and unified the lands north of the Yangtze. Meanwhile in the south, Liu Yu usurped the emperor of the Eastern Jin Dynasty and founded the **Liu Song Dynasty**. This marked the beginning of the **Northern-Southern Dynasties** period, during which *Thousand Autumns* is set.

NORTHERN-SOUTHERN DYNASTIES

For a period of almost ninety years, Northern Wei held strong. The first half of their reign was focused on expansion, but when Tuoba Hong rose to power in 471 C.E., he championed the dominance of **Buddhism** and Han culture, going so far as to ban Xianbei clothing from the court and assigning one-character family names to Xianbei nobility (Tuoba Hong himself changed his family name to Yuan).

South of the Yangtze, the regime changed hands three times—from Liu Song to **Southern Qi** to **Liang**, before the **Chen Dynasty** that ruled during *Thousand Autumns* was finally established in 557 C.E.

In the north, **Northern Wei** held strong for almost ninety years. While the first half of their reign was focused on expansion, when Tuoba Hong rose to power in 471 C.E., he championed the dominance of **Buddhism** and Han culture, going so far as to ban Xianbei clothing from the court and assigning one-character family names to Xianbei nobility.

A rift slowly developed in Northern Wei between the increasingly Han-acculturated aristocracy and their own armies who adhered more to the traditional, nomadic lifestyle. A series of rebellions escalated into all-out revolt, and by 535 C.E. the kingdom had split in half. **Western Wei** was ruled by Yuwen Tai, and **Eastern Wei** by Gao Huan. In the space of a

generation, they would depose the last of the old leadership and become the kingdoms of **Northern Zhou** and **Northern Qi**. In the Zhou Dynasty to the west, rule favored the Han-acculturated nobles, while in the Qi Dynasty to the east, the traditional tribes came into power.

Qi's military superiority over both Zhou and Chen began to diminish due to corruption and incompetence in the ruling class, and particularly that of the emperor's grandson, **Gao Wei**. After a politically turbulent period of regency in Zhou, **Yuwen Yong** took power in 572 C.E. and made a point of bolstering state administration and military affairs.

By 575 C.E., where *Thousand Autumns* begins, a new maelstrom is already brewing…

THE THREE SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

This section hopes to provide some basic context as to the major schools of thought that inform the background of *Thousand Autumns*, so that readers may explore the topic in more depth on their own. Note that with their long period of coexistence, the schools have all influenced each other deeply, and their ideals have become rooted in Chinese culture itself, even among non-practitioners.

Daoism (道)

Daoism revolves around the concept of **Dao**, or "Ways": the courses things follow as they undergo change. Though there are many Dao a human can choose from, there is one primordial "great Dao" (大道), the source of the universe and origin of all things—the void of infinite potential. The course all things in the universe follow is the "heavenly Dao" (天道), the natural order.

According to Daoist principles, by imposing constraints and artifice, humanity strays from the primordial Dao and stagnates. In particular, the rigid social roles enforced by society are seen as unnatural and an example of degradation. For humans to flourish, they must revert themselves, disengaging from these tendencies in order to return to the primordial Dao.

This is sometimes known as “becoming one with heaven” (天人合一). The method of disengaging is called **wuwei** (无为), sometimes translated as inaction or non-interference.

Expanding on this idea, Daoism has the concepts of **Xiantian** (先天, “Early Heaven”) and **Houtian** (后天, “Later Heaven”). The prenatal Xiantian state is closer to the primordial Dao, and thus is both purer than and superior to the postnatal Houtian state. The Houtian state is created at birth, along with the **conscious mind** that thinks and perceives and which in turn suppresses the primordial mind. This is what gives rise to sources of suffering: anger, worry, doubt, desire, and fatigue.

The goal of *wuwei* is to reverse the changes brought on by Houtian and return to the primordial state of Xiantian. To conflict with nature is to stray from it, and to intervene in the natural order—as society does—is to perpetuate degradation. Disengaging from all of these influences requires rejecting social conventions and detaching from the mundane world altogether, so seclusion and asceticism are common practices. Emptying oneself of all emotion and freeing oneself from all artifice is the only way to achieve union with heaven and surpass life and death itself.

When it came to politics, Daoism was often seen as a justification for small, *laissez-faire* governments—in fact, *laissez-faire* is one of the possible translations of *wuwei*—supporting low taxes and low intervention. The anti-authority implications of its philosophies were not lost on its followers, nor on their rulers. As a result, it wasn’t uncommon for Daoism to struggle to find its footing politically, despite its cultural pervasiveness.

Buddhism (佛/释)

Founded by Gautama Buddha in India, Buddhism only arrived in China during the Han Dynasty, well after Confucianism and Daoism. Despite early pushback and social friction, its parallels with Daoism eventually helped it gain widespread influence.

Buddhism is rooted in the concepts of reincarnation, karma, and **Maya**—the illusion of existence. Attachment to Maya keeps living beings rooted in the cycle of reincarnation, where they are beholden to the

principle of karma that determines their future rebirths. Buddha claimed that this eternal cycle is the root of all suffering, and that the only escape is through achieving **Nirvana**, or enlightenment. To achieve enlightenment is to fully accept that all things within existence are false. It then follows that any emotions, attachments, or thoughts that one develops while interacting with and perceiving the world are equally false. This philosophy extends to the attitude toward karma—the ideal Buddhist does good deeds and kind acts without any expectation of reward or satisfaction, material or otherwise.

Despite these selfless ideals, it also wasn't uncommon to see Buddhist temples amass land, authority, and wealth through donations, worship, and the offerings of those seeking better futures or rebirths. Combined with the men who'd leave their homes to join these temples as monks, this sometimes made the relationship between Buddhism and rulers a tricky, precarious one.

Confucianism (儒)

Unlike Buddhism and Daoism, Confucianism focuses on the moral betterment of the individual as the foundation for the ideal society. The founder Confucius envisioned a rigidly hierarchical system wherein the lower ranks have the moral duty to obey the higher ranks, and those in superior positions likewise have the moral responsibility to care for their subordinates. This social contract is applied to everything from the family unit to the nation itself—the emperor is the father to his people, and they in turn must show him absolute obedience.

To foster such a society, Confucians extol the **five constant virtues** (五常): **benevolence** (仁), **righteousness** (义), **propriety** (礼), **wisdom** (智), and **integrity** (信). Paragons who embody all five virtues are called **junzi** (君子), sometimes translated as "gentlemen" or "noble men," while their direct opposites are *xiaoren*, literally "petty people," and sometimes translated as "scoundrels."

Throughout most of history, mainstream Confucians believed in the goodness inherent in humanity, that people can better themselves through education and learning from their superiors. The ideal ruler must be the

ultimate *junzi* himself and lead by example, thereby uplifting all of society. In the same vein, Confucius expected officials to be virtuous parental figures, held to a higher moral standard than ordinary citizens.

Due to its emphasis on social order, Confucianism was easily the most influential and politically favored of the three schools throughout history. Its social contract was so absolute that even dynastic takeovers had to be performed in a way that did not "break it." Usurpers who acted otherwise ran the risk of being seen as illegitimate in the eyes of the people. Famously, the old emperor had to offer the new emperor his position multiple times, with the new ruler declining three times (三让) before finally accepting.

Bonus: Legalism (法)

Though not regarded as one of the "big three" and although it received far less overt support, Legalism was enormously influential for one key reason: it served as the foundation for the entire Chinese government tradition for two thousand years, regardless of dynasty.

Unlike the three schools, which are each in pursuit of an ideal, Legalism is entirely utilitarian and concerned only with efficacy. This is reflected in its Chinese name, the "house of methods." Core to its beliefs is the idea that human nature is selfish and evil, and so people must be motivated through reward and punishment. Morality is inconsequential, the ends justify the means, and the most effective administration must minimize corruption by restricting its subordinate administrators as much as possible.

It was with these tenets that the first unified Chinese empire, the Qin Dynasty, dismantled the existing feudalist system and established in its place a centralized government overseen by the emperor. After the Qin's collapse—brought about in part due to how harsh a fully Legalist regime was on the people—the succeeding Han Dynasty under Emperor Wu of Han made sure to suppress Legalism as a philosophy. However, they inherited the entire Legalist government structure mostly unchanged, though their policies were softened by a push towards Confucianism. This trend of furtively repackaging Legalist tendencies within the leading school of thought (usually Confucianism) continued almost uninterrupted for this

period of two thousand years, and rulers continued to study Legalist texts like the *Han Feizi*.

OTHER IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

DAOIST CULTIVATION, THE ZHUYANG STRATEGY, AND THE POWER OF FIVE

In real life, the scholar Tao Hongjing compiled the famous, three-volume *Concealed Instructions for the Ascent to Perfection* (登真隱訣, translated in the novel as "Dengzhen Concealed Instructions"). For *Thousand Autumns*, Meng Xi Shi invented an extra associated manual, called the *Strategy of Vermillion Yang* (朱陽策, translated in the novel as "Zhuyang Strategy") after the real-life Monastery of Vermillion Yang on Mount Mao where Tao Hongjing secluded himself.

The *Zhuyang Strategy* draws heavily from classical concepts of Daoist cultivation and pulls together many ideas from Chinese culture. Primarily, they are based on the *Wuqi Chaoyuan* (五气朝元, roughly "Returning the Five Qi to the Origin"). The first lines of each of the *Zhuyang Strategy*'s five volumes correspond exactly to the *Wuqi Chaoyuan*'s five principles:

1. The heart conceals the mind; Houtian begets the conscious mind, while Xiantian begets propriety; once emptied of sorrow, the mind is settled, and the Fire from the Crimson Emperor of the South returns to the Origin.

2. The liver conceals the soul; Houtian begets the lost soul, while Xiantian begets benevolence; once emptied of joy, the soul is settled, and the Wood from the Azure Emperor of the East returns to the Origin.

3. The pancreas conceals the thought; Houtian begets the deluded thought, while Xiantian begets integrity; once emptied of desire, the thought is settled, and the Earth from the Yellow Emperor of the Center returns to the Origin.

4. The lungs conceal the anima; Houtian begets the corrupted anima, while Xiantian begets righteousness; once emptied of rage, the anima is

settled, and the Metal from the White Emperor of the West returns to the Origin.

5. The kidneys conceal the essence; Houtian begets the clouded essence, while Xiantian begets wisdom; once emptied of cheer, the will is settled, and the Water from the Black Emperor of the North returns to the Origin.

The traditional Chinese worldview includes the **Five Phases**, the **Deities of the Five Regions** (also known as the **Five Emperors**), the five constant virtues, the **Five Spirits**, and the five major internal organs. The *Wuqi Chaoyuan* links all these ideas together, unifying them into a doctrine that explains how one can achieve immortal status or "godhood." For those who are interested, we provide here a brief introduction to several of these concepts in hopes that readers can further appreciate the world of *Thousand Autumns*.

THE FIVE PHASES

The **Wuxing** (五行), sometimes translated as Five Agents or Five Elements, are a cornerstone of Daoist philosophy. Unlike the Four Elements proposed by Aristotle, the Five Phases—**Metal** (金), **Wood** (木), **Water** (水), **Fire** (火), and **Earth** (土)—are seen as dynamic, interdependent forces. Each phase can give rise to another (生), or suppress another (克). As Daoism dictates that all entities are bound by the natural order, the Five Phases can be seen as an overarching rule set that governs all aspects of nature. Most things are regarded as corresponding to a certain phase, including but not limited to planets, seasons, cardinal directions, organs, colors, and types of qi.

FIVE EMPERORS, FIVE REGIONS, FIVE COLORS

In Daoism, the **Wufang Shangdi** (五方上帝), or High Emperors of the Five Regions, are the fivefold manifestation of the **Supreme Emperor of Heaven** (天皇大帝), or simply **Heaven** (天). As they correspond to the

Five Phases, each emperor has an associated cardinal direction, as well as a color that informs his namesake.

FIVE SPIRITS, FIVE ORGANS

The traditional Chinese conception of the spirit divides it into five separate aspects: **mind** (神), **soul** (魂), **thought** (意), **anima** (魄), and **will** (志). These classifications may not be a perfect match with their western definitions. For example, the will—which arises from the **essence** (精)—is responsible for memory, as well as discernment and judgment. A strong will is generally associated with clear-mindedness. In another example, the anima governs instincts, impulses, and reflex reactions, and is said to dissipate on death, unlike the soul.

Each of the five aspects is said to reside in one of the five major internal organs–heart, liver, pancreas (includes the spleen), lungs, and kidneys, which in turn also correspond to the Five Phases. The *Wuqi Chaoyuan* claims that part of ascending to immortality is learning how to "return" the true qi of each aspect to one's Dantian, or "Origin."

THE FOUR OCCUPATIONS

The 士农工商 classification of citizens as *shi* (eventually **gentry scholars**), *nong* (**farmers**), *gong* (**artisans**), and *shang* (**merchants**), was a cornerstone of ancient Chinese social hierarchy strongly associated with both Confucianism and Legalism.

As the upper class and decision-makers, the *shi* naturally ranked the highest, followed by the peasant farmers who were valued as the backbone of the nation. Merchant businessmen were seen as agents of exploitation who profited from price fluctuations, so they were placed lowest.

In practice, these hierarchical rankings shaped cultural attitudes more than they dictated political clout. Even though merchants were looked down upon, the much-needed cash flow they provided made them far more influential than the artisan and farmer classes. This created a curious situation—merchants were both sought after and derided by the *shi* in charge of governance. In later dynasties some merchants went so far as to

purchase positions within the imperial court, making them honorary *shi* and granting them legal protections.

Though the *shi* remained firmly at the top of the social hierarchy regardless of the period, the membership of the class changed over time. Originally, the *shi* were warrior aristocrats not unlike western knights, but they became obsolete when the Warring States period mobilized the common folk for warfare. With the rise of philosophy, the warriors slowly gave way to scholars. Later, during the harsh Legalist regime of the Qin Dynasty, the emperor began assigning administrative responsibilities to learned scholars who showed promise and merit. To weaken the authority of the noble class, he dismantled the existing feudalist system in favor of a centralized bureaucracy of dedicated officials.

Though the Qin's system of governance persisted well after the dynasty's collapse, the importance of family lines meant that prominent scholar-officials effectively became the new aristocracy. Their wealth and influence almost always guaranteed their descendants the resources to land their own positions within the imperial court. *Thousand Autumns* includes examples of powerful clans like the Su and the Xie; one talented ancestor could elevate their entire family for generations to come. It wasn't until the Tang Dynasty that a true merit-based system was introduced—the civil service exams—that would give capable commoners the chance to find their place in governance.

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APPENDIX

Glossary

GLOSSARY

GENRES

Danmei (耽美, "indulgence in beauty"): a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys' love) genre in Japanese media and is better understood as a genre of plot rather than a genre of setting. For example, though many danmei novels feature wuxia or xianxia settings, others are better understood as tales of sci-fi, fantasy, or horror.

Wuxia (武侠, "martial heroes"): one of the oldest Chinese literary genres and usually consists of tales of noble heroes fighting evil and injustice. It often follows martial artists, monks, or rogues who live apart from the ruling government. These societal outcasts—both voluntary and otherwise—settle disputes among themselves, adhering to their own moral codes over the law.

Characters in wuxia focus primarily on human concerns, such as political strife between factions and advancing their own personal sense of justice. True wuxia is low on magical or supernatural elements. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

NAMES, HONORIFICS, & TITLES

Diminutives, nicknames, and name tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

Da-: A prefix meaning "eldest."

-er: A word for "son" or "child." When added to a name as a suffix, it expresses affection.

Xiao-: A prefix meaning "small" or "youngest." When added to a name, it expresses affection.

Cultivation Sects

Shizun: Teacher/master. For one's master in one's own sect. Gender neutral. Literal meaning is "honored/venerable master" and is a more respectful address, though Shifu is not disrespectful.

Shixiong: Older martial brother. For senior male members of one's own sect. When not bound by sect, speakers may also append "-xiong" as a suffix for names, as a friendly but courteous way of addressing a man of equal rank.

Shijie: Older martial sister. For senior female members of one's own sect.

Shidi: Younger martial brother. For junior male members of one's own sect. When not bound by sect, speakers may also append "-di" as a friendly suffix to names, with "-laodi" being a more casual variant.

Shimei: Younger martial sister. For junior female members of one's own sect.

Shizhi: Martial nephew or niece. For disciples of the speaker's martial sibling.

Qianbei: A respectful title or suffix for someone older, more experienced, or more skilled in a particular discipline. Not to be used for blood relatives.

Other

Gongzi: A respectful address for young men, originally only for those from affluent households. Though appropriate in all formal occasions, it's often preferred when the addressee outranks the speaker.

Lang: A general term for "man." "-lang" can be appended as a suffix for a woman's male lover or husband, but it can also be used to politely address a man by pairing it with other characters that denote his place within a certain family. For example, "dalang," "erlang," and "sanlang" mean "eldest son," "second son," and "third son" respectively. "Langjun" is a polite address for any man, similar to "gentleman."

Niangzi: A polite address for young women, similar to “maiden.”

Xiansheng: A polite address for men, originally only for those of great learning or those who had made significant contributions to society. Sometimes seen as an equivalent to “Mr.” in English.

Xiongzhang: A very respectful address for an older man the speaker is close to. Approximately means “esteemed elder brother.”

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TERMINOLOGY

Face (脸/面子): A person's face is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for someone's reputation or dignity and can be extended into further descriptive metaphors. For example, "having face" refers to having a good reputation and "losing face" refers to having one's reputation damaged.

Internal Cultivation (内功): Internal cultivation or *neigong* refers to the breathing, qi, and meditation practices a martial artist must undertake in order to properly harness and utilize their "outer cultivation" of combat techniques and footwork. As Daoism considers qi and breathing irrevocably linked, a large part of internal cultivation centers on achieving the advanced state of **internal breathing** (内息). Practitioners focus on regulating and coordinating their breaths until it becomes second nature. This then grants them the ability to freely manipulate their qi with little effort or conscious thought.

In wuxia, the capabilities of internal cultivation are usually exaggerated. Martial artists are often portrayed as being able to fly with qinggong, generate powerful force fields, manipulate objects across space without physical contact, or harden their bodies and make themselves impervious to physical damage.

Jianghu (江湖, "rivers and lakes"): A staple of wuxia, the jianghu describes the greater underground society of martial artists and associates that spans the entire setting. Members of the jianghu self-govern and settle issues among themselves based on the tenets of strength and honor, though this may not stop them from exerting influence over conventional society too.

Meridians: The means by which qi travels through the body, like a bloodstream. Some medical and combat techniques target the meridians at specific points on the body, known as acupoints, which allows them to

redirect, manipulate, or halt qi circulation. Halting a cultivator's qi circulation prevents them from using their internal cultivation until the block is lifted.

Names: When men and women came of age in ancient China, they received a new name for others of the same generation to refer to them by, known as a **courtesy name**. Use of their original or **personal name** was normally reserved only for respected elders and the person themselves—using it otherwise would be very rude and overfamiliar.

Using an emperor's personal name was even more disrespectful. Rulers were usually addressed by the dynasty they led, and they each had a formal title to distinguish themselves from their predecessors or successors. For example, Yuwen Yong's official title was "Emperor Wu of Northern Zhou" (北周武帝).

Pair Cultivation (双修): Also translated as dual cultivation, this is a cultivation practice that uses sex between participants to improve cultivation prowess. Can also be used as a simple euphemism for sex.

Parasitic Cultivation (采补, "harvest and supplement"): The practice of draining life energy and qi from a host to strengthen one's martial arts. As the bodies of men are believed to hold more *yang* qi while women hold more *yin* qi, the person in question will often "harvest" from the other sex to "supplement" themselves, which gives the practice its association with sexual cultivation.

Qinggong (轻功): A real-life training discipline. In wuxia, the feats of qinggong are highly exaggerated, allowing practitioners to glide through the air, run straight up walls and over water, jump through trees, or travel dozens of steps in an instant.

Seclusion (闭关): Also known as "closed door meditation," seclusion or secluded cultivation is when a martial artist isolates themselves from the rest of the world to meditate and further their internal cultivation for the purpose of healing injuries or taking their martial arts to the next level.

True Qi and Cores: True qi (真气) is a more precise term for the "qi" commonly seen in Chinese media. In Daoism, one's true qi or life force is believed to be the fusion of Xiantian qi and Houtian qi.

True qi is refined in the lower Dantian (丹田, "elixir field") within the abdomen, which also holds the foundations of a person's martial arts, called the core. In *Thousand Autumns*, Daoist cores and demonic cores are mentioned, differentiated by the discipline (and hence Dao) the practitioner chose. All internal cultivation and breathing builds off these foundations—losing or destroying them is tantamount to losing all of one's martial arts.

In wuxia, a practitioner with superb internal cultivation can perform superhuman feats with their true qi. On top of what is covered under internal cultivation above, martial artists can channel true qi into swords to generate sword qi, imbue simple movements and objects with destructive energy, project their voices across great distances, heal lesser injuries, or enhance the five senses.

Yin and Yang (阴阳): In Daoism, the concept of *yin* and *yang* is another set of complementary, interdependent forces that govern the cosmos. It represents the duality present in many aspects of nature, such as dark and light, earth and heaven, or female and male. *Yin* is the passive principle, while *yang* is the active one.

Warring States Period: An era in ancient Chinese history characterized by heavy military activity between seven dominant states. The rise of schools of thought like Daoism, Confucianism, and Legalism was partially in response to the extreme turmoil and suffering that were rampant during this time. It lasted from around 475 B.C.E. to 221 B.C.E, when the

Qin state annexed the rest and established the first unified Chinese empire: the Qin Dynasty.

Weiqi (围棋): Also known by its Japanese name, *go*. Sometimes called "Chinese chess," it is the oldest known board game in human history. The board consists of a many-lined grid upon which opponents play unmarked black and white stones as game pieces to claim territory.

Zoroastrianism: A religion from ancient Persia founded by the prophet Zoroaster.

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About the Author

Foolish A-Qiao,
When have I ever
been good to you?
- Meng Xi Shi

Meng Xi Shi is a renowned web author whose works of fiction combine detailed research with witty writing, winning the hearts of readers around the world. Her works are published in China by Jingjiang Literature City. She goes by “Meng Xi Shi Ya” on Weibo.

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Footnotes

1. 先天高手. Powerful martial artists who've achieved the Xiantian or "Early Heaven" state through extensive training and cultivation. For an explanation of the concept of Xiantian, please see the entry on Daoism in the glossary.

2. 闭关. Also known as "closed door cultivation," seclusion is when the martial artist isolates themselves from the rest of the world to meditate and further their internal cultivation, for the purpose of healing injuries or taking their martial arts to the next level.

3. 江湖. Literally "rivers and lakes," the jianghu society describes the greater underground society of martial artists that span the setting. Its members self-govern and settle issues among themselves based on the tenets of strength and honor, though this may not stop them from exerting influence over conventional society as well.

4. 师兄. Literally "senior martial brother." Used by the speaker to respectfully address a male senior with whom they share the same master or sect.

5. 山河同悲. "The mountains and rivers too are grieving." Used as a lamentation of tragedy.

6. 轻功. Literally "lightness skill." A real-life training discipline, in wuxia the feats of qinggong are often highly exaggerated, allowing practitioners to glide through the air, run straight up walls, walk on water, jump through trees, or travel dozens of steps in an instant.

7. 经脉. Like blood circulates via the blood stream, qi is believed to circulate via meridians. The original Chinese word is a general term for the circulatory systems of the body.

8. 内息. Refers to an advanced state of breathing martial artists can achieve. A fundamental component of internal cultivation, detailed further in the glossary entry on internal cultivation.

9. 内功. The cultivation of qi and breathing within the body, contrasting with the outer cultivation of combat techniques. Please see the glossary entry on internal cultivation for more detail.

10. 真气. A more precise term for the "qi" commonly seen in media. In Daoism, one's true qi, or life force, is derived from the fusion of Xiantian qi and Houtian qi.

11. 围棋. A strategy board game, sometimes better known as go in the West. Involves black and white pieces on a 19×19 grid.

12. 命门. A vital acupoint located on the small of one's back and between the kidneys, serving as the source of one's life force. A connected acupoint is located on the pinky finger.

13. 师弟. Literally "junior martial brother." Used by the speaker to address a male junior with whom they share the same master or sect.

14. 圣门. This is how practitioners of the demonic discipline refer to themselves, contrasting with outsiders. It can also refer to Riyue Sect itself.

15. 郎君. A respectful address for young men, similar to “gentleman.” It can be used as a suffix, as seen here.

16. 娘子. A respectful address for young women, similar to “maiden.” It can be used as a suffix, as seen here.

17. The prefix “A-” (阿) is usually appended onto a single character of a name to create an affectionate address.

18. 师侄. Literally “martial nephew,” though it can be used for women as well. For the disciple of someone’s martial sibling.

19. 当归. The Chinese Angelica root. As its Chinese name literally means “should return,” it was often used in poetry as symbolism. This is why it aroused Yan Zhiwen’s suspicions.

20. 公子. A respectful address for young men. Though appropriate in all formal occasions, it’s often used when the person in question outranks the speaker.

21. 兄. Literally “elder brother.” A friendly but polite address for a man of equal rank.

22. Refers to what some starving parents on the brink of death did when they couldn’t bear to eat their own children. They exchanged their own child for another unrelated child, then cooked and ate that one instead.

23. Refers to Jiang Ziya, a Chinese noble and Prime Minister who lived during 11th century B.C.E. Sometimes considered a Daoist Immortal.

24. 大郎. Literally “eldest son,” here it’s used as a suffix.

25. 前輩. A respectful title or suffix for someone older or more experienced in a particular discipline.

26. 兄长. Close to “esteemed elder brother.” A highly respectful way to address a close older man.

27. 先生. A polite address for men. Sometimes seen as an equivalent to “Mr.” in English.

28. 三郎. Literally “third son.”

29. In Daoism, burning an item can grant it to the deceased in the afterlife.

30. For a detailed explanation on the rationale behind the Zhuyang Strategy, please see the special glossary entry “Daoist Cultivation, the Zhuyang Strategy, and the Power of Five.”

31. 师妹. Literally “junior martial sister.” Used by the speaker to address a female junior with whom they share the same master or sect.

32. 郡王. A noble title that could be conferred to both members of the royal family or trusted officials. They ruled over commanderies, which were a type of administrative region similar to counties.

33. 大桥小桥. Refers to the Two Qiaos (桥) of Jiangdong, famed for their extraordinary beauty. The Da- and Xiao- prefixes here denote the elder and younger sister respectively.

34. 怀柔百神，及河峤岳. From a song (《周颂·时迈》) recorded in the Shijing; it was written for King Wu of Zhou as he offered sacrifices to the gods of nature. The verse in question exalts the king's kindhearted magnanimity. A qiao (峤) is a very tall, very precipitous mountain peak, hence Mu Tipo's remark.

35. 表字. When men and women came of age, they received a new name for others of the same generation to refer to them by. Continuing to use the original given name instead would be rude and overfamiliar.

36. 命门. A vital acupoint located on the small of one's back and between the kidneys, serving as the source of one's life force and true qi.

37. 长生牌位. A memorial tablet erected in a person's name to wish them good fortune and a long life.

38. 清修. Extreme self-discipline of the body and mind was incredibly important to Daoists. For more on its ideals, please see the glossary entry for Daoism.

39. 掌教师兄. Yu Ai here addresses Shen Qiao with his formal title "Sect Leader" but appends the -shixiong suffix out of respect.

40. 三师弟. Literally "third junior martial brother."

41. 相见欢. Likely a reference to a poem (《相见欢·无言独上西楼》) by the last emperor of the Southern Tang Dynasty, Li Yu. It lamented the "bitterness of parting" within his heart as he watched his country fall.

42. 脸. A person's face is a metaphor for their dignity or reputation.

43. 大师兄. "Most senior martial brother." Da- as a prefix here denotes that he's the first of Qi Fengge's disciples.

44. 四师弟, 小师妹. "Fourth junior martial brother" and "most junior martial sister" respectively. Xiao- as a prefix here denotes that she's the last of Qi Fengge's disciples.

45. 天为谁春. A reference to a famous poem (《画堂春·一生一代一双人》) about star-crossed lovers by Nalan Xingde of the Qing Dynasty. Approximate translation: "For whom does spring come?"

46. 君子不器. From Lunyu, a collection of Confucius's teachings. Approximate translation: "A true gentleman (junzi) is unlike a tool." Tools cannot consider their actions and serve a narrow purpose, so Confucius told his students that a junzi must be broad-minded and thoughtful, tolerant and flexible, instead of rigidly fixating on tenets.

47. 一生二，二生三，三生万物. From the Daode Jing, which talks about the Dao being the origin of all things. The complete verse has an additional "the Dao begets one" at the very front.

48. 菟丝草. A parasitic climbing plant from the morning glory family. As dodders require a host, the "dodder flower" became poetic

symbolism for the frail, delicate, and helpless woman. As Shen Qiao is a man, the narration uses “dodder herb” instead.

49. 道心. Literally “Daoist heart,” here it refers to the foundations of Shen Qiao’s internal cultivation and martial arts.

50. 断袖. A euphemism for “homosexual.” The term originates from a story about the Emperor Ai of Han and his lover, Dong Xian. In it, the emperor woke from a nap to find Dong Xian still asleep, head on his sleeve. Loathe to wake him, the emperor cut off the sleeve before getting up.

51. 士农工商. Known as the “four occupations,” they also functioned as classes within the ancient Chinese social hierarchy. See the special glossary entry on the “Four Occupations” for more details.

52. 二郎. Literally “second son,” here it’s used as a suffix.

53. 太建北伐. Occurred in 573 C.E., where Southern Chen sought to claim land north of the Yangtze River. This event helps date Thousand Autumns as beginning around early 575 C.E.

54. 南有乔木. Zhou Fang is quoting “Hanguang,” a famous poem from the Shijing. The qiao (乔) here refers to a tall, lofty tree.

55. 道侣. Daoists can find partners to undertake their training with. Oftentimes Daoist partners will be lovers, but this may not always be the case.

56. 采补. Literally “harvest and supplement,” this is the practice of draining life energy and qi from a host to strength one’s martial arts. Often associated with sexual cultivation.

57. 老弟. A very casual way to address one’s junior.

58. 先天八卦. The bagua (literally “eight symbols”) represent the fundamental principles of reality in Daoism and have both a Xiantian arrangement and Houtian arrangement.

59. 紫微斗数. A fortune-telling system sometimes translated as “Purple Star Astrology.” It uses the positions of stars and planets at one’s birth to make predictions and calculations about their destiny.

60. 郎. An intimate suffix used to address one’s husband or male lover.

61. 双修. Also translated as dual cultivation, this is a cultivation practice that uses sex between participants to improve cultivation prowess. Can also be used as a simple euphemism for sex.

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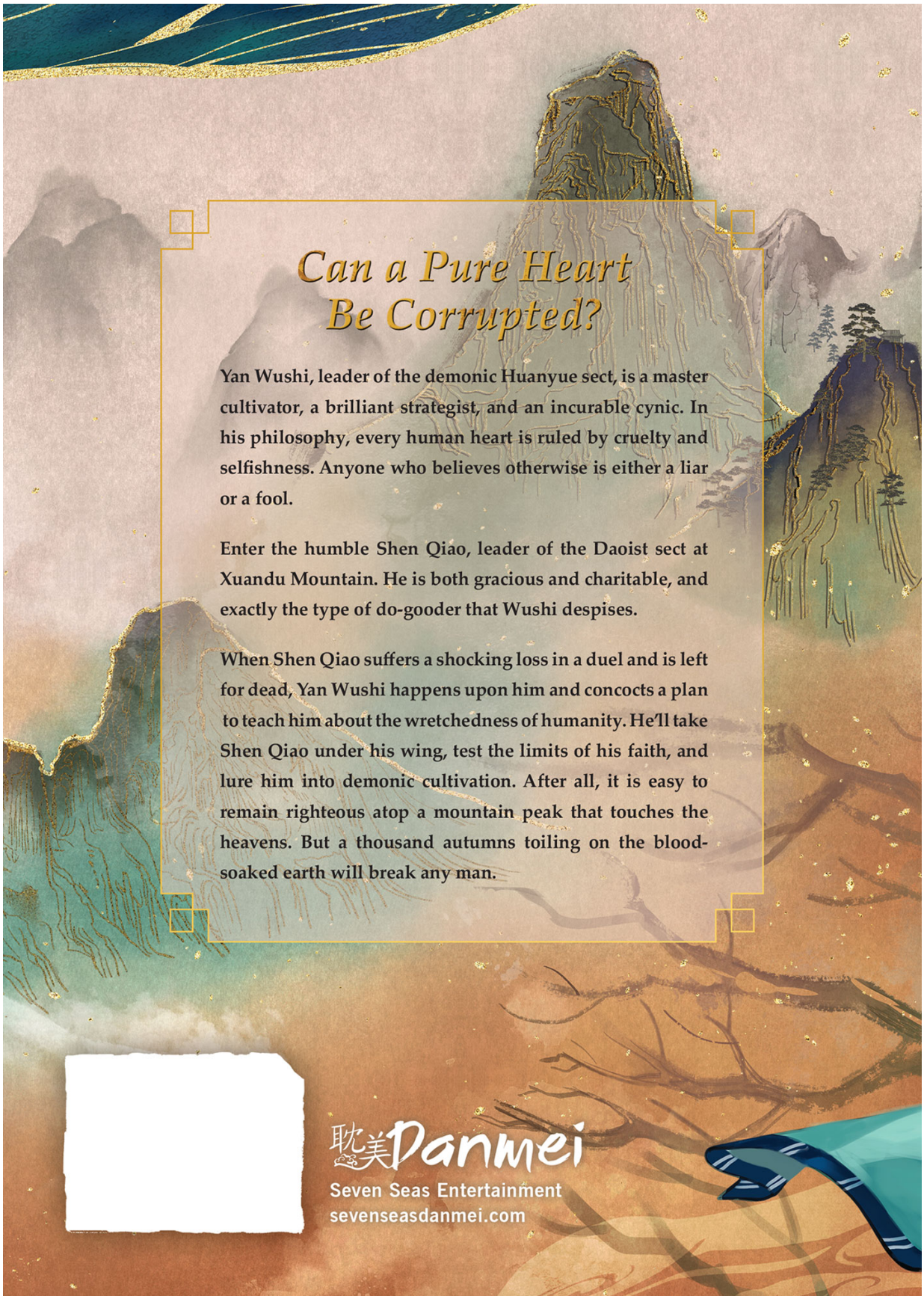
Can a Pure Heart Be Corrupted?
Yan Wushi, leader of the demonic Huanyue sect, is a master cultivator, a brilliant strategist, and an incurable cynic. In his philosophy, every human heart is ruled by cruelty and selfishness. Anyone who believes otherwise is either a liar or a fool.
Enter the humble Shen Qiao, leader of the Daoist sect at Xuandu Mountain. He is both gracious and charitable, and exactly the type of do-gooder that Wushi despises.
When Shen Qiao suffers a shocking loss in a duel and is left for dead, Yan Wushi happens upon him and concocts a plan to teach him about the wretchedness of humanity. He'll take Shen Qiao under his wing, test the limits of his faith, and lure him into demonic cultivation. After all, it is easy to remain righteous atop a mountain peak that touches the heavens. But a thousand autumns toiling on the blood-soaked earth will break any man.
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